Tsurugi no Joou to Rakuin no Ko Volume 1

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剣の女王と烙印の仔 I

杉井 光

Hikaru Sugii

THE SWORD QUEEN AND THE BRANDED CHILD

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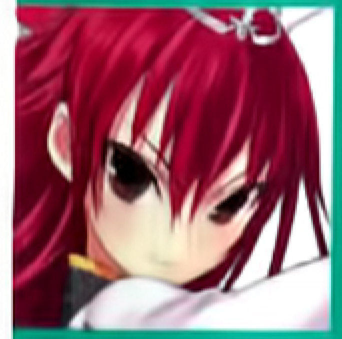

剣の女王と烙印の仔 I 杉井 光

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剣の女王と烙印の仔 I

周囲の者の命運を喰らう《獣の烙印》を、両手と額に持って生まれた少年クリス。彼は傭兵としてひとり戦場を放浪していたが、一人の少女との出逢いがすべてを変える。彼の前に舞うように現れたのは、白い衣に身を包み大剣をふるう少女、ミネルヴァ。未来を予見する力と圧倒的な剣技を備え、死神と怖れられた伝説的な剣士であった。「おまえが、わたしを殺す者か」その夜、クリスに殺されるはずだったミネルヴァの運命は、烙印によってねじ曲げられることになる――!!　さまざまな作風で活躍する杉井光が満を持して贈る、星の流れと運命に立ち向かう少年少女の王道ファンタジー。

MF文庫J

杉井光の本

剣の女王と烙印の仔 I ［イラスト：夕仁］

杉井光（すぎい・ひかる）

1978年東京生まれ。『火目の巫女』で第12回電撃大賞《銀賞》を受賞、デビュー。代表作は『さよならピアノソナタ（全4巻）』『神様のメモ帳①～③』（電撃文庫）、『ばけらの！①②』（GA文庫）、『さくらファミリア！①～③』（一迅社文庫）など。

HP『NEET TEEN』

http://www.d3.dion.ne.jp/~hikaru_s/nvs/

Illustration

◎夕仁（ゆに）

ゲーム会社でデザインに従事、その後フリーに。代表作は『静野さんとこの蒼緋』（電撃文庫）、『螺旋の国の3ドリル』（HJ文庫）、『死神ナッツと絶交デイズ』（MF文庫J）、『Another Time Another Leaf 鏡の中の探偵』（DS・キャラクターデザイン）など。

HP『PLASTIC GIRL』

http://p-girl.sakura.ne.jp/

カバーイラスト／夕仁　装丁／伸童舎

剣の女王と烙印の仔

I

杉井光

Hikaru Sugii

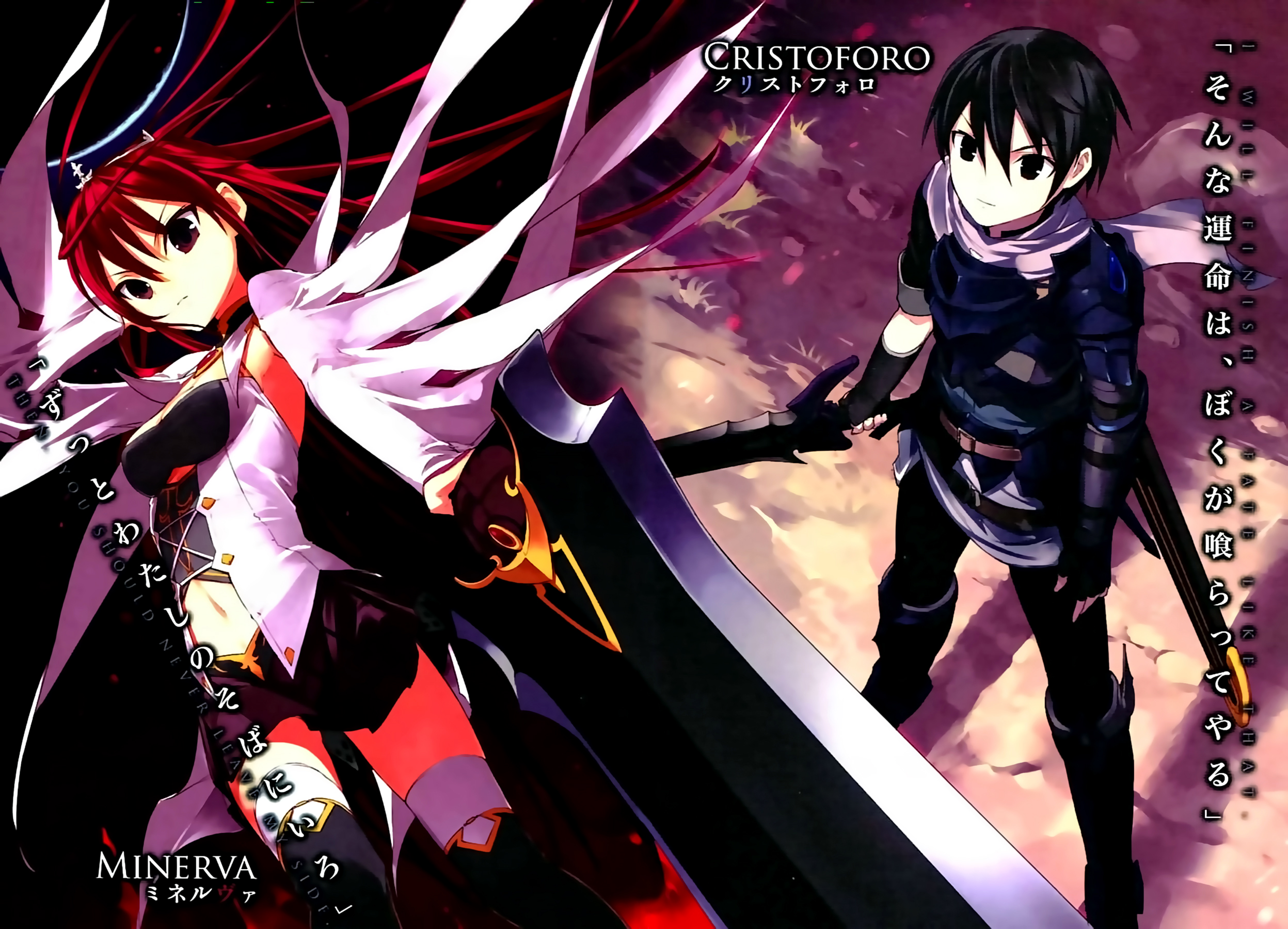
TH
SWORD QUEE
AND
THE BRANDED
CHILD

ふたたび夜が来るまでに逃げよう。誰とも巡り逢わないように、ひとりの黄昏を、逃げよう。

I MUST RUN AWAY BEFORE THE NIGHT FALLS.RUN ALONE IN THE DUSK.SO THAT I WOULD MEET NO ONE.

HOWEVER, THE FATE MADE THE TWO MEET.AT THE NIGHT OF A NEW MOON.IT WAS THE NIGHT OF TWO HUNDREDTH NEW MOON HE HAD SEEN IN HIS LIFE

けれど、巡り逢う。それは生まれ落ちてからちょうど二百度目の、新月の夜のことだ。


CRISTOFORO
クリストフォロ
「そんな運命は、ぼくが喰らってやる」
I WILL FINISH A FATE LIKE THAT.
「ずっとわたしのそばにいろ」
THEN YOU SHOULD NEVER LEAVE MY SIDE.
MINERVA
ミネルヴァ

「その太刀は貸しているだけだ。必ず持って帰ってこい」
I ONLY LET YOU USE THAT SWORD. SO YOU MUST BRING IT BACK TO ME NO MATTER WHAT.
GILBERTO
ジルベルト
PAOLA
パオラ
DID I NOT TELL YOU? THE BEAUTIFUL NEVER DIES.
「言ったでしょう？綺麗なものは死ねないのだって」
FRANCESCA DA ZACCARIA
フランチェスカ・ダ・ザカリア
I'VE BEEN ANXIOUS, MAYBE I'M NOT AS GOOD AS I SHOULD.
「なんの役にも立っていないんじゃ　ないかって」

剣の女王と烙印の仔
I
THE SWORD QUEEN AND THE BRANDED CHILD
杉井 光
Hikaru Sugii

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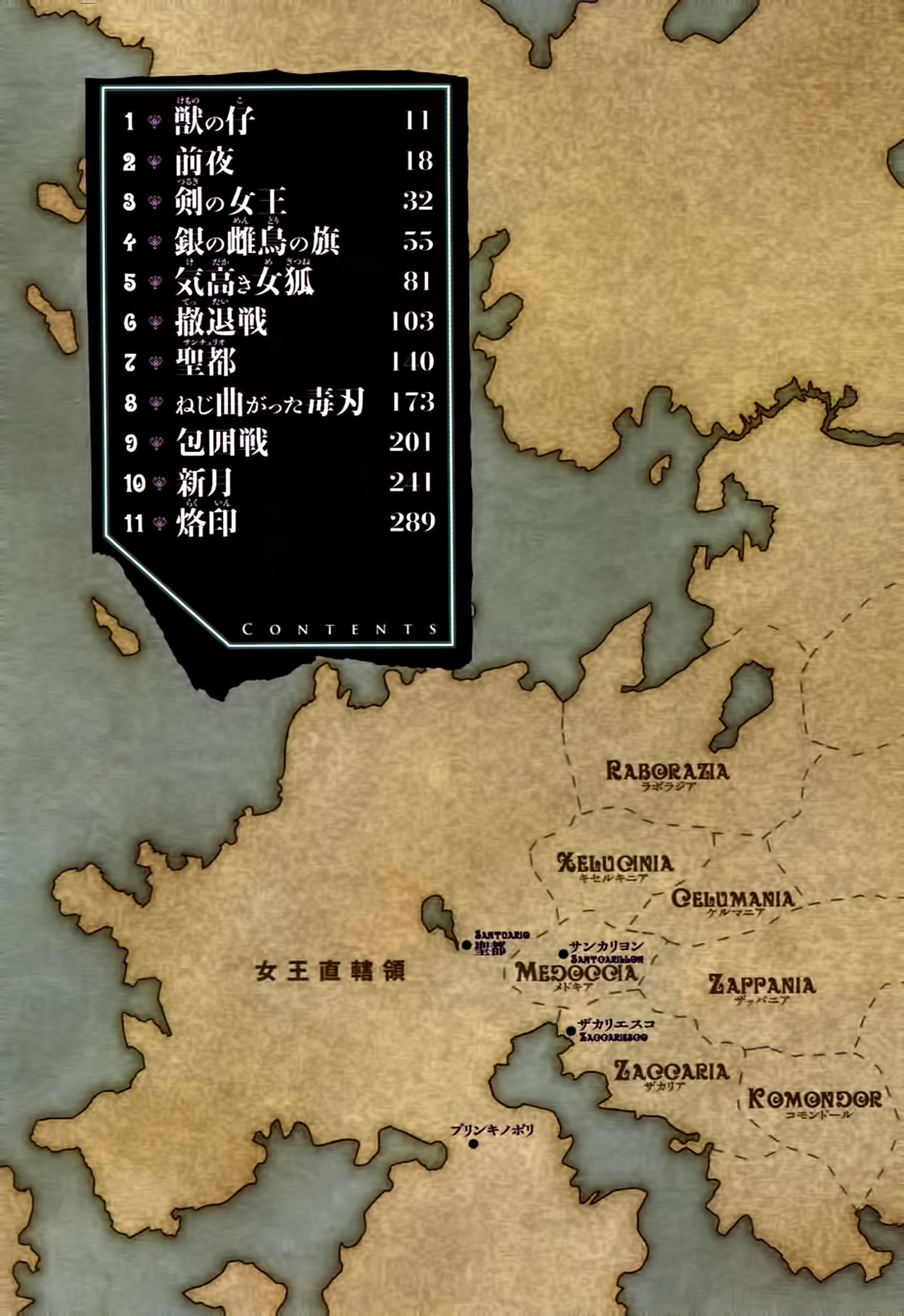
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MEDOCCIA
メドキア
ZAPPANIA
ザッパニア
ザカリエスコ
ZACCARIESCO
ZACCARIA
ザカリア
KOMONDOR
コモンドール
プリンキノポリ

Chapter 1 – Beast's Son

Your father was a beast—Chris heard such a description of his father from his mother's mouth.

He returned to his wilderness, and is not here anymore...... She said.

「*Now, you have nothing left except for me.*

「*There can only be me alone in your eyes; Devour my hair, drink my blood, and then live on......*

Before his seventh year, Chris was still living a life of being imprisoned in a store that was full of hay and firewood. As he had never once basked in sunlight, every inch of skin on him was snow white; so white that it was chilling. The only thing that gave him comfort was that whenever he faced an urn of water, the reflection of his face in the water resembled his beautiful mother a lot.

—*Except for Mother, I really have nothing left......*

Chris's body had been frail since birth. Whenever winter arrived, his chest would hurt so much that he would cough up blood, and at those times, his mother would take care of him without rest; picking herbs for him without caring that it froze her hands, feeding him yam porridge that was originally meant for her. All that she did caused the blood that he coughed up to not stick in his throat.

—If mother isn't here one day, then what should I do?

On a certain winter morning, he woke up in his mother's lap. Opening his eyes, he looked at his mother's facial features as she held him in her lap. That moment, she was sleeping lightly with weariness clouding her face . All of a sudden, a chest pain different from when he was coughing blood suddenly assaulted him.

—If she isn't here anymore, there would probably be no one in this world who even knows of my existence anymore......

Don't worry—his mother said while holding his hands, lightly touching her lips on his forehead at the same time .

Red marks that were like crawling worms branded Chris's forehead and the back of his hands since birth. She told him that it was the proof that blood of the beasts flowed in his body—

「*So don't worry, you are a son of the beast. Devour me—my blood, my meat; swallow my whole life into your belly, allowing me to forever become part of your body......*

Moonlight shone into the store through the transom. That night, the moon was a big, sleek new moon. On nights when the new moon hung in the night sky, the brandings on Chris's body would emit a faint, soft white light with a tinge of blue. At the same time, a faint pain that caused his body to feel pleasure slowly pierced into his chest little by little. He felt the pain to be almost like a summon......

—Actually, Chris knew faintly in his heart that his mother was always deceiving him.

Occasionally, there would be people visiting her from her mother's side. Chris would be locked inside the store, and he would eavesdrop on his mother and the opposing party's conversations through the slit of the door......

「*—Ever since your husband was killed, you always lock yourself in your house......* It was a voice that sounded somewhat hoarse because of age. Chris always heard this voice questioning his mother: **I heard sounds of movement in your store. What in the world are you hiding.....?**

「*—You didn't refrain yourself from throwing away that baby that time, did you?!*

*

During the winter when he was seven, Chris's existence was found out by the villagers.

Amongst his mother's cries, the door of the store was furiously pushed open by the masses— it was the first time in his life that Chris had seen an adult man. A few men rushed forward to press Chris onto the floor. His mother's wails tortured his eardrums. Perhaps due to the strong fear, pain and anger in his chest, he did not realize at the moment that a sense of burning suddenly throbbed on his forehead and hands.

「*—This thing is the beast that brings misfortune!*

An old woman that seemed to be an elder of the tribe forcedly opened her eyes that were almost blind and furiously glared at Chris while saying:

「*Look, it is that marking on his forehead. This kid will devour everyone's lives, leaving misfortune, and then living on alone!*

「*Why didn't you kill him when he was still a baby?! I did tell you to toss him into the river!*

「*Why did you secretly raise him?!*

「*—Why didn't you kill him, isn't he the child you borne after you were defiled by the enemy in a war? This is a sign of bad luck— What do you think we will do if he brings disaster? What if the village is attacked by other armies again? Hurry up and kill him, hurry up and kill him......* Even though Chris's existence was resented, assaulted furiously with words and became the target as a trash in the hands of the surrounding villagers, his mother still hugged him to her chest, trying to protect him. That moment, the warmth from his mother was the last feeling that Chris's mother gave to him.

*

And on that night, the night of the new moon, the village was assaulted by a gang of bandits. Every house was burnt to ashes. Villagers were slaughtered. Chris's mother was defiled before his very eyes, and then was killed just like that......

He did not remember how he survived after that.

That night, he regained consciousness under the night sky stained in brownish red by the blazing fire. The thick odor of rust drifted in his surroundings, while the tears and ashes that floated in the air stained his whole face. Chris saw numerous corpses before his eyes— Apart from his mother and the villagers, there was a crowd of bandits donning old, dirty armor whose bodies were severely deformed.

The new moon that was like a white scratch, climbed past the zenith of the night sky after a long time. Before that, Chris had remained blankly lying on the ground, staring at the pools of blood on the ground and the flickering flames. That moment, the store that he had lived in from the time when he was little spat out the flickers of flames from the blaze and started to collapse.

He could not hold back the trembling of his chin. However, the trembles were completely irrelevant to the coldness of the night......

—Mother...... died.....

—Mother died...... But why am I still alive

—Why did I abandon her...... living on alone?

—I already don't have the strength to move a finger......

—Just let me lie by her side like this......

—Sleeping forever by mother's side......

Thus, the roof that was unable to remain erect finally collapsed from the attack of the ferocious flames. It was possible that everything in that place would be burnt to ashes by the blazing fire not long after...... Chris attempted to crawl towards the corpse of his beautiful mother. However, he realized all of a sudden that he was holding a foreign object......

—A large sword

A blade of uneven widths was completely stained in blood...... Chris hurriedly searched his surroundings. The corpses of the scattered bandits also held large blades of the same type...... Which means, the huge sword in his hands was snatched from the bandits?

—How can this be possible? How could I do such a thing..... ?

Blood stained his blade. Whose blood was that— that's right, why is it that apart from the corpses of the villagers , the bandits were there as well? Their throats were cut, while the armor on them was devastated due to being pierced through with innards flowing out. And those people, how did they die?

—Did I really kill them?

—If it is indeed so......

—Why was I unable to save my mother?

—I couldn't save her......

—Why......

Chris stared blankly at the huge sword in his hands. The flames reflected on the blade shone in a cold radiance, absorbing all the fear and tremors of his heart. The store that he had always lived in made various noises as it was devoured by the flames, and faded as he gradually focused on other matters in his brain.

—Why did I kill them? Even though I was unable to save my mother at that time?

—Why am I feeling so calm?

—Even though I was unable to save my mother...... Why...... ?

That moment, a voice suddenly came into his ears— or it might be better to say, into his consciousness.

......Devour them.

......Eat up all of their fates.

He understood in a flash that it was the voice of the beast. He looked at his fists that looked pale because of its overexertion. The insignia on the back of his fist gave off a blinding light. He covered his forehead and immediately felt a scorching pain burn his palm.

......Devour them.

......Eat up all of their fates, and live on by yourself.

—The beast...... is saying the same things as mother......

The same structure of both of them caused a terrified but sweet sensation to arise in Chris. That moment, the blood of his mother, unnamed villagers and the bandits mixed together, sliding down the blade, seeping between his fingers.

He heard the sound of the beast swallowing the blood, and at the same time, he once again recalled the words his mother had once said.....

「*Now, you have nothing left except for me.*

「*There can only be me alone in your eyes; Devour my hair, drink my blood, and then live on......*

However, she wasn't there anymore. If so, whose meat would he have to eat, and whose blood would he have to drink to live on? Whose body would he have to lean on so that he would not feel cold— Would someone like that search for him? Or could he even meet such a person? And then...... would he have to eat up such a person?

—If it is indeed so. Then perhaps he should allow his dry throat to forever remain in such a bad state, allow his stomach to continue feeling the hunger. Not crossing the fates of other people, living on all alone......

Chris stood up, looking towards the new moon hung high in the sky while dragging his sword. At the same time that he took his first step, the sound of his home collapsing due to the flames rang behind him.

The remains of the fire drifting in the air, he had his back on the scene, walking into the blurred, profound night step by step.

Chapter 2 – The Previous Night

"So— You say that you will be just seventeen this year? How did you survive in the battlefield these ten years?"

The campfire crackled. At the side of the flames, a muscular man with a bushy mustache spoke bluntly to Chris:

"Isn't your sword a famous weapon from the Eastern Country? Only knights with an established name could get that. Did you slip into their bedrooms to get it? Hahahaha......"

Although the boor looked clumsy, he was a true Knight who had been awarded the Purple Rose badge and purple banner of the Celestial Kingdom army.

Speaking of which, the long years of war had caused the national resources to weaken. Because of that, it was impossible for the Army to last if they did not bestow the name of a Knight upon the captain of the mercenary squad. Chris regretted his decision of negotiating personally, and at the same time averted his gaze from the mustached boor.

In the dark night, tents were raised on the field. A few troublesome-looking mercenaries had their backs on the campsite, surrounding the fire with their gazes focused on Chris and the boor, maliciously leering at the conversation between the two as though they were watching an entertaining show.

Actually, Chris only wanted to tell the captain that he wanted to leave the team that night. However, for some reason, not only was he dragged into their idle chatter while they drank, he was forced to go along with their topics as well.

"This sword is even taller than you. How do you use this? Why don't you give it to me? I'll say, instead of holding a large sword like this, playing with a longsword is a better fit for you. Come over to my tent tonight."

Among the dirty hisses, the campfire continued to flicker. Chris was worried for his sword, hugging it in his lap at the same time.

"I snatched this sword from an enemy after killing him when I joined an expedition to Princinopolis."

Even though Chris thought that those people wouldn't listen to his words, he still gave such a statement.

It was a treasure he had won from a rather famous enemy general, and that weapon in turn gave him each of his jobs. He never stayed in a mercenary squad for long. However, as he was a kid who looked and was built as slender as a girl, the sword was absolutely necessary for people to recognize his strength.

When the mercenary squad had been recruiting fresh blood, the person who interviewed him was not the bear-like captain, but an aged soldier. He witnessed Chris's talent, and informed him of the duration of the contract. However, said soldier had left the battlefield due to injuries, causing Chris's application to leave to become extremely troublesome.

"Hmph. If I was the one organizing the recruitment of soldiers, I would've kept you by my side to serve me long ago."

He grinned broadly, thoroughly inspecting Chris from his head to foot with his dirty gaze.

It was definitely not the first time Chris had encountered this gaze. He was often mistaken on the battlefield for a male prostitute among the crew entertainers.

"Why do you want to leave, and today to boot? We're going to launch a final attack on the enemy tomorrow. They might just be a tenth of us. Are you scared?"

"Boss, he's probably so scared he peed his pants. What a wuss."

A mercenary sitting near the campfire spat out those words, making the audience laugh out loud.

"I heard that they have the Salt Sprayer on their side this time. He probably feels like running away after hearing this news."

"I heard that quite a few kids from the other teams wanted to slip away when they heard this news as well."

"Wahahaha— You're talking about that Salt-Spraying fellow? Isn't that just some kind of excuse those guys who ran away after losing a battle made up?"

"You're talking about the guy on the battlefields without any armor and who's in all white, aren't you?"

"I heard that even javelin throws and arrows couldn't hurt him."

"How can there be such a person?"

The rumor that they were discussing was known to Chris as well— the Salt Sprayer, the 'Salt-Spraying Soul Reaper of the Battlefield'. It was a strange news spread among mercenaries these last few years. It was said those who saw that person definitely wouldn't come back, and that it was a folly to meet him.

Actually, there would always be such rumors on the battlefield, but when you think about it, one would not be alive after they really met such a soul reaper, so who in the world would be able to spread such a rumor? Thus , everyone would just ignore this with a laugh.

"Say, quite a lot of rumors of spirits and monsters have surfaced these days, and people gave them seriously exaggerated names."

"Really, something like the Salt Sprayer or Star Eater.... .. The heck? It's not like we're telling stories to make a kid sleep."

"The Star Eater huh—? Hah, chances are that that rumor is bogus too. Something like him completely eradicating a thousand men brigade, eating his comrades ' fates to survive......"

"And also, I heard, in the last war that happened at the borders, a team of fifty people rushed into the enemy camp, and only that guy returned with the head of the enemy commander, while all of the others died."

"Ahahahahahaha— That's crazy, if he really had such powers, he'd have long been knighted!"

"Isn't that so? If there's really such a person, I'd have long dragged him out and cut open his stomach to vanquish this thing!"

When he heard that, Chris's fingers subconsciously tightened as he held onto his arms with his palms.

He couldn't care less about the Salt Sprayer. However, they were talking about the Star Eater. He couldn't just pretend that he had never heard of that. After all, the so-called Star Eater was an accursed name that those who had once stayed by his side gave to him. The mercenaries giving rough laughter while holding cups of beer never would have thought that the terrifying Star Eating Beast that they were discussing was the young kid before their very eyes.

"Why is this guy shaking?"

The bearded mercenary captain glanced at Chris and had a colossal misunderstanding about his reaction, " What's wrong? Scared of a kid's bedtime ghost story like this? You wanted to leave just because of this? What kind of lunacy are you spouting?"

"The validity of my contract is only until the sun rises tomorrow morning."

"Hah? Is that for you to decide?"

It seemed like the captain did not know of the effective time of his contract. Chris could only sigh.

He could feel the sense of pain that continued to pulse on his forehead and the back of his hands.

The reason that Chris was unwilling to stay in a mercenary squad or to be among Knights for an extended period of time was due to the beast brandings on him. After all, when the beast in him awoke, it would devour each and every one of the fates of the people surrounding him, without an exception. It was exactly the same as what the elder in the village used to say—the beast will 'devour people's fates'. On each new moon night, everyone by Chris's side would face a disaster—the mercenary squad that had sheltered Chris when he was little had been vanquished just like that.

—I don’t want anyone to be dragged into this curse of mine anymore!

"This is bad luck. This concerns the spirit of the team, so you are forbidden from mentioning this anymore."

The captain stopped the topic in his low, rough voice. Chris could only shut up. Just as he was brooding over how he should leave the team in the coming battle, the captain's stern expression changed to a dirty smile......

"If you're scared, you can just stay in the camp. But you'll have to serve the soldiers at night, and you'll be dead tired."

The words made Chris shudder terribly. Because he could not hear any hint of a joke from the captain's tone anymore. That moment, the captain's stout bear-like body rose and headed towards him after walking by the campfire.

"W-Wait a minute!"

Just when Chris was standing up and was about to turn tail, a hand suddenly grabbed him from behind.

"It seems like I have to make you forget about any thoughts of leaving the team."

The stench of beer drifted to him from behind his ears along with obscene words. He turned around and saw a ruddy face behind his shoulders...... And there wasn't only one. There were a total of three people, working together to lock his shoulders. The act caused the giant sword in Chris's hands to loosen, falling onto the ground with a clank— *I really shouldn't have mentioned this when they were drunk......* The thought just flitted through his mind. Chris did not even have any time to regret before his collar was grabbed by the captain.

"S-Stop it!"

"Bufufufu, look, don't you sound like a woman!"

"Don't you do anything stupid!" "See how we'll pity you after our Boss had his fun!"

Along with the captain, the other three whiskered faces approached as well. Fear surged in Chris's mind—*Should I kill them...... No, I'll need to go against the whole camp if so, and will be vanquished by them. But if this goes on—*

Just at that moment, a tearing sound broke through the air between Chris and the captain, causing the bear-like face to shrink backwards in an instant. At the same time, a trail of blood blossomed on the tip of his nose, bright red liquid dripping downwards.

"......Ugh!"

It was a short javelin. It had traveled through the space between Chris and the captain, piercing into the ground along its path and making a strong tremor in the end.

"—Who goes there!"

The three soldiers restraining Chris together paled, grabbing their swords at the same time. That allowed

Chris to quickly escape from their clutches, hurriedly lying on the ground to grab his own sword in the presence of the strong aura on his right.

Unknowingly, only a dead silence filled the area. The hiccups of drunkards and clear tinkle of colliding cups disappeared completely, leaving only the crackling of the campfire.

The fire exposed a silhouette. A tall man walked out from a dark spot. The man wore a luxurious military robe with a purple silk cape. His jet black straight hair was tidily combed to the back, and his eyes were sharp like an eagle's. Maybe because of his youthful energy, the man gave off an arrogant, domineering feel.

"Actually starting on a young soldier in your team. What an undisciplined squad. I can almost smell the stench of swine in a pigsty. How nauseating."

The man's voice sounded as cold as metal just hardened.

"You're the one who threw the javelin huh!" "This guy isn't one of us!" "Blasted kid!" "Which squad are you from !"

"I want you to pay for the scratch on my nose!"

The captain kicked the campfire, and then dashed towards the uninvited guest along with four other soldiers with their blades.

At the instant the blades flashed, the surrounding soldiers suddenly felt a sense of terror. A slight commotion started to spread among the mass as well. Nobody made any loud noises— they were all struck deaf in shock and awe.

In an instant, all four muscular men fell onto the ground. The younger man had already pulled out his longsword when everyone else had been unable to respond, but there weren't any signs of blood at all.

Chris's gaze barely grasped what happened in that instant— with lightning speed, the man had flashed his blade past the throats of the two mercenaries who first lunged. It was so quick that it was chilling. However, the more terrifying thing was that the two whose necks were slit suddenly turned around to squash the other two onto the ground, as though invisible wires were directing their each and every muscle.

"W-What did you do!" "M-My body moved by itself!" " What's happening!"

The four stout mercenaries grappled on the ground.

What is the meaning of this......? The insignia on Chris's forehead pulsed continually. Evidently, it was not a swordsmanship anyone could use.

W-What ***is*** *this person!*

Chris finally remembered that the purple on that person couldn't be worn by those who were not among the clan of the Celestial Kings. Apart from that, that purple cape was embroidered with a badge of two unicorns in an arc......

"—My lord, why are you taking action alone? That is too dangerous!"

Sounds of footsteps followed the exclamation. After that, Chris saw a few young servants in extravagant military clothing running out from a dark location the campfire did not manage to illuminate.

"Master Cornelius, please return to the camp!"

"Why did you specially come over to the campsite of such a small unit!"

The young servants looked at the surrounding filthy mercenaries and couldn't help but frown.

"Aren't you exaggerating things a little? I just came over to a pigsty to have a look, but you nannies still wanted to come over. You'll become the laughing stock of the imperial court."

The noble whom the servants called Cornelius had his mouth curled in a sneer. The moment his name had been said, the surrounding mercenaries had froze. Chris had heard of the name as well.

Consort Prospect, Cornelius Epimex.

House Epimex was one of the Three Great Duchies at the zenith of aristocracy. It was one of the most prominent among the nobility. And among the nobility, only members of the Three Great Duchies were qualified to marry royalty. Not only was Cornelius the Lord of house Epimex, he was a skilled swordsman. He had won numerous battles on the battlefield, and had been appointed the general of this expedition, leading the whole expedition team.

It was said that Cornelius was a swordsman good at using magic swordsmanship, as his sword could kill without seeing blood.

"W-Why......?"

The bear-like mercenary squad captain scrambled out from his underling's body after some effort and moaned while raising his shaking palm:

"Why did Your Lordship...... C-Come here......"

That moment, as though suddenly realizing what he should do, he hurriedly kneeled on the ground, pressing his head down before the general. The surrounding underlings quickly did the same as well.

"Swine in the pigsty should not mimic human speech."

To that, Cornelius just spat out in disdain. After that, his sharp gaze fell onto Chris.

That moment, Chris couldn't move at all. It was not because of fear. It was because the three beast insignias on him were burning his body like a blazing inferno...... He did not know why either. However, Cornelius's sharp gaze was like silver spurting out from a furnace, so cold that Chris felt thoroughly disgusted from the bottom of his heart.

—Why did the General come here?

—Isn't the main force of the expedition squad at the mountain?

Just when Chris was pondering about the questions with unattainable answers, Cornelius had already put his large sword in his hands away into its scabbard, and was walking towards him in large steps. Chris couldn't help but take a step backwards, completely forgetting about the necessary etiquette.

"I came to see what you look like."

Cornelius bent down and leaned his face closer while saying.

—See me?

—See how..... I look like?

Confusion caused Chris to be flustered and unable to move. As a Consort Prospect, why would he want to recognize a wandering mercenary like him......

"Those swine probably hired you as a mercenary by chance without knowing anything. But in fact, there are quite a lot of people who know how you look like as the Star Eater as well. The extent of your reputation is far above your imagination."

Cornelius extended a finger, pressing it on Chris's chin to raise his face.

Quiet murmurs of discussion spread through the surrounding crowd—

"He's the Star Eater?" "A kid like him?" "Seriously?!"

The fragments of conversation suddenly surfaced vigorously like bubbles from boiling water, and disappeared in an instant one by one.

"You are the tough soldier who killed one person after another on the battlefield with your slender arms? You didn't even let your own people go." Cornelius gave a cruel smile. "I heard that the assault party sent a squad of four hundred people to infiltrate the fortress during the fortress assault battle on prelate territory, Decraet, and when they brought down the city gate, the only one alive when they opened the door was you, isn't that right?"

Chris swallowed after hearing that, but he just couldn't shift his gaze from the Archduke.

"Since you did so much in our service, why didn't you just join the Army and be rewarded?"

Cornelius's questioning voice was like a blunt blade, cruelly toying with Chris.

"Is it because of the brandings on you?" He asked.

Chris gasped in shock, and was caught by Cornelius when he was about to jump backwards. Cornelius grabbed his face with all ten fingers, and the force was so large that it almost squeezed the eyeballs out of his sockets. However, in the pair of chilly palms, the fear in Chris's heart and his trembling faded slowly as well.

He felt the insignia on his forehead shining with white light without waiting for the claw-like moonlight of the new moon to spill down.

—Why does he know of the branding of the beast?

"You were born in a village at Pruoua, weren't you? It was territory where Father once attacked in the past. I've already heard that a Beast's son was born there long ago, and was thinking of going there when the mark could be clearly distinguished. In the end, I heard that he burnt his village down along with the bandits that attacked his village, making Father and I so disappointed."

When he was talking, Cornelius's fingers raised Chris's face, "But I never thought that I would actually meet the son of the Beast on the battlefield. Hmm...... The insignia is indeed present."

He extended his index finger to touch the insignia on Chris's forehead. A scorching heat could be felt from the insignia.

—This person...... This person is just too dangerous. Sooner or later, I-I......

Just when the thought flashed past Chris's mind, a sudden assault hit him. He felt a cold sense of pain at the right side of his body, and everything before him dimmed. He supported his body with his hands, and realized that Cornelius had tossed him onto the ground. The purple cloak waved, cutting through the air in a circle, and Cornelius's silhouette that turned to leave had already walked past the other side of the campfire, and was heading towards the mercenary squad captain who was still lying on the ground step by step.

"Rise, swine." Cornelius called coolly.

"You shall be the rear assault in this battle" He said.

"......Wha—? Ah, yes, yes...... But in the contract, we...... "

Before he had finished his words, Cornelius already waved his arms. The instant that his movements ended, there rang the sound of water droplets falling onto the sandy ground. The ears of the mercenary squad captain spurted blood. The body that was stout as a bear extended its hands to cover its ears while curling on the ground and making terrible howls.

This time, even Chris's eyes were unable to catch the movement of him pulling out his sword.

"I said, swine in the pigsty should not mimic human speech!"

Cornelius's cold tone while speaking was cruel like a sharp ice pick slowly stabbing into the skin.

He put his sword away into his scabbard, keeping it in his lap along with the scabbard, and took out a roll of scroll instead. The wax seal on the scroll caused everyone to swallow— it was a wheel with open wings. It was the symbol of each faction in the clan of Celestial Kings, the crest of the Sibyl Queen who governed the whole Celestial Kingdom.

"This is an Oracle Decree, prioritized over the contract.
"

Seeing the Oracle Decree, the bear-like mercenary squad captain hurriedly pressed his whole body down.

The said Oracle was a prediction bestowed upon the Sibyl Queen by the all-seeing Goddess, Tuekay. It was the divine power that supported the supremacy of the whole Celestial Kingdom, and thus nobody in the whole country dared to go against the Oracle Decree by Tuekay.

Even so, the dissatisfied clucking of tongues of a few people at darker spots in the campsite could still be heard. An atmosphere of doubt filled the surroundings, the soldiers' suspicion of the authenticity of the Oracle Decree completely undisguised.

Because the royal family had borne only daughters, the Three Great Duchies who owned qualifications to be the Consort Prospect were the true holders of power in the whole Celestial Kingdom. Hence, people in the Three Great Duchies would often do as they wished in the pretense of a fake Oracle Decree. It was something in the Celestial Kingdom that even children knew. However, even so, nobody around really dared to stand before Archduke Cornelius to demand that he open the decree and read its contents.

With the surroundings in silence, Cornelius put away the decree in his hands and said to the mercenary squad captain after glancing at Chris:

"You must be careful not to let the Star Eater escape— Now that his true identity is revealed, he might plan to escape."

The words were like a large rock jamming itself in Chris's throat, causing him to be unable to speak even if he had wanted to. After that, Cornelius turned around to focus his gaze on Chris once more. A pair of chilly eyes looked at him, passing through the darkness the campfire could not shine on.

"I'll say, you won't be able to escape no matter how much you try. People owning the branding of the beast are destined to be unable to grab anything, not able to have encounters that will stay in their life. You can only contain blood in your mouth, struggling on the ground in a pitiful manner forever, crawling if you can, struggling until the instant when your life ends, and dying like a wild beast. This is the fate that must be shouldered by one with the brandings."

—That person..... He actually knows everything, doesn't he ?

—He knows of the brandings on me, and understands them far more than I do...... But why is that?

—He said that people owning the branding of the beast are unable to escape from such a fate no matter what? What a joke. Even without the influence of the brandings, my fate is still to die alone on the battlefield!

"......Star Eater......"

"Bringer of misfortune....." "Hey, he's looking at us!" " Why would a person like him appear in our squad?" " Damn, this is just eight lifetimes of bad luck!"

The people in the mercenary squad focused their gathering dissatisfaction on Chris.

"Boss, chase that guy out! He'll bring us bad luck!"

"Idiot, didn't you listen to Archduke at all? If you don't follow his instructions, things won't end with just an ear chopped off— all of you shut up and stop making noise!"

Chris listened to the noise made by the people behind him and left the area illuminated by the campfire. In the process, a few gazes were still fixated on him. He raised his head to look at the night sky. There wasn't a moon that night. The following day, would be the night of the new moon.

I have to escape before night descends once again...... Chris planned in his heart— *I will escape to a twilight world where I will be all alone, where I will not meet anyone anymore.*

However, Chris did not escape from the encounter. It happened on the two hundredth night the new moon hung on the night sky after Chris was born.

Chapter 3 — Queen of The Sword

The evening sky squashed the setting sun, trying to shatter the remaining fragment of day into the mountain road extending from the wilderness. Pools of red were splattered by the kneeling Chris' legs, as though they were blood left before the setting sun perished.

Armors ripped off people's arms, broken spears, twisted bows, countless corpses, fresh blood moistened all of them.

—So I am the only one to live yet again, huh……

Chris extended his hand and pressed it against his forehead. The insignia emitting a pallor glow gave off a slight heat. With his other hand, he picked up the huge sword sunk in a pool of blood.

He dipped his fingers into the blood leftover from a vault of blood and wiped it on his forehead. Every time he stood alone in the wilderness covered with corpses, he would always repeat the same ritual. It was his humble wish, hoping for the beast on his forehead to settle down after drinking the blood, sating its thirst for slaughter……

The only thing that the ritual brought was a hopeless emptiness. That was because the thirst for slaughter of the beast on his forehead would not be satisfied with fresh blood; the thing that it devoured was other people's fortune. Thus, the feeling that doing so every time would let the beast on his forehead move while sipping the blood was only his imagination in the end. Even so, he still sank his hand into the sea of blood again and again.

The mercenary squad that Chris was in was completely annihilated. The mustached captain, lying on the ground not too far away, was covered in sand and mud, the color of his body almost the same color as the land. Even flies were already present over his dead eyeballs.

He still could not escape in the end, while the battle lasted until twilight. The instant that the new moon rose, the beast on his forehead awoke. He did not know how many enemies he had killed. There was no sign of anyone moving, he was the lone person to survive. Only him.

He raised his head to look at the new moon that had risen just now. Night wind blew, while he allowed his body to be immersed in the chilly wind that was like rusted steel.

There was a not too serious sword wound on his abdomen, but large amounts of blood still oozed out of it. He felt that the blood that the beast on his forehead swallowed was currently pushing out the blood in his own body, causing it to flow out from the wound, wetting his shirt drop by drop. He knew that the wound was not fatal, and hated it because of it......

—Since I don't wish to kill, why do I still have to hover among battlefields......

—Since I don't wish to kill, why do I not just hide at a mountain where people are scarce, dying there by myself......

They were questions that he would always ask himself each night when the new moon rose. However, he firmly banished such a thought at that moment—he thought, his actions might have been unrelated to the beast on his forehead, and he definitely enjoyed the pleasure of devouring the fortune of other people from the bottom of his heart, willingly getting controlled by that desire. In other words, the beast on his forehead was actually himself from the start.

All of a sudden, countless roars and metallic sounds of vigorous collisions rang out. Chris turned around and saw a few sparks dancing on the horizon. Arrows with sparks alighting on their tips interweaved, dancing out a bright trail. The triangular flag waving in the air was the flag symbolizing the guardian knights of the celestial king's army.

Leaning on his sword, Chris supported his numb legs and stood up from the ground.

—Should I hurry there?

—Should I hurry there and pile up more corpses.......

The mercenary squad that Chris belonged to was a pawn planned to be sacrificed from the start. Chris understood that. They were surrounded by enemy forces the instant they entered the battlefield. The forces of the National Union surrounded them, and thus vanquished them. The tactic used the mercenary squad as bait, gathering the enemies, eliminating them after surrounding them with the forces of the celestial king's army that was much larger than the enemy...... That moment, the cruel smile of Archduke Cornelius surfaced in Chris' mind......

—You wish to kill me with a method like this? Are you not somewhat looking down on me......

—You should have sent me to a grimmer battlefield...... You should have done that......

Chris lived again, while his employer died. If he just stayed in the place full of corpses until the day, it didn't matter no matter where he wanted to disappear to. However......

Chris stepped forward, moving upwind to the place filled with the smell of rust and wails.

That's right

Let us devour their lives

The beast on Chris' forehead muttered, causing him to climb onto the slope made of sand. He stood at the top of the hill, feeling the sounds of the battle brought to his face by the wind— a sound wave made of roars of soldiers, vigorous collisions of metals and scattered clatters of hooves pounded on his face— hot, dark blood strongly surged in his heart. The numerous torches before him gave off a bright radiance, lighting up the surrounding armor, lances and swords; warhorses that were hit by arrows, prancing around in pain. The earth was silent. The earth resounded with noises. Chris was led forward by the acrid stench of blood.

—Hmm, what is this?

Chris did not see the silhouettes of horses of the opposing army. Only a sea of purple flags could be seen in the darkness. If so, who was the celestial kings' army that hired him fighting with? Piteous neighs of warhorses interweaved with panicked wails of soldiers, ringing in Chris' ears—

"Salt sprayer!" "It's the Salt Spraying one!" "Soul reaper —"

The Salt Spraying Soul Reaper. After hearing the name , Chris hurriedly rushed over to the center of the battlefield. The densely packed formation of the spearman crew was quickly broken by the opposing party—

And Chris saw it— on the battlefield, a silhouette that looked like white flames came into Chris' view. The vicious flames of white danced nimbly, cutting through the rain of arrows. At the tip of the white flame were actually clothes— something like the robe of a shrine maiden moved along with the wind when she danced in an altar. Among the pure white sleeves that fluttered like feathers, crimson hair danced as though it was on fire. The dull, piercing lights that looked as though they were tearing flames apart were the trails drawn out by the huge sword in her hands.

—A woman?

Facing the scene, Chris could not help but shudder— it was a girl. The girl waved the heavy sword that had height similar to hers, and danced gracefully in the rain of arrows, angry shouts and the whirlwind of swords.

"Release the arrows! Release the arrows—"

Among the screeched commands, a rain of arrows fell once more. The girl waved her sleeves before the arrow rain, allowing the huge sword in her hands dance quickly in the night skies. It was like the trails of the movement had a strong attraction. It was as though the densely packed arrows that drew out sharp arcs in the air were attracted by it, flicking away from the wind made by the large sword.

Chris could not help but bate his breath. In his eyes, the girl did not even blink when facing the formation of archers. In the next instant, the girl had already dashed into the enemy's base where a weak point had appeared, and viciously slashed with her sword. Quite a few bodies of spearmen and soldiers died in a foreign land among the splattered blood.

As though the white flames that went into a frenzy was going to engulf the whole battlefield, it whirled into the crowd of armored soldiers with astonishing speed, completely annihilating them all.

The girl's distance to Chris gradually shortened as she continued to move. That was when he saw that the girl was not even wearing armor, but the assault of blades and spears could only fruitlessly slash her sleeves......

—It seems like the rumors are true......

The Salt Spraying Soul Reaper on the battlefield— According to rumors, anyone who saw her would get a curse of death, which caused people to tremble at the mention of her. She walked on the battlefield alone, single-handedly vanquishing numerous troops, while the rumors were left by the soldiers in a trance who luckily survived an encounter with her— the said soul reaper was actually a woman wearing a white shirt, having red hair.

That was when Chris found out that all of it was true.

At the moment when he reached the pole bearing the purple flag, a large enough number of corpses to form hills was already surrounding it. The blood in the air turned into mist in the night, while the white shirted girl stood there, leaning on her sword.

A torch that had fallen onto the ground illuminated the girl's face under her sweeping red hair. Her extraordinary beauty caused Chris to fall into a daze for a moment.

Droplets of blood stained the girl's cheeks, the radiance of flames blazed in her round, black eyes, strong resolution was drawn on her thin lips, appearing to be poignant and peerless because of her awe-inspiring appearance.

On the muddy ground, the flames on the torch continued to burn, while the folded flag and the girl's red hair continued to be swept along the cold, biting wind. Under the pitch black skies when all had stopped, the girl looked at Chris, her black eyes glaring directly at him .

"......So you're the envoy of fate sent to end my life?"

The girl's voice was more innocent then Chris had imagined, being unmatched with her frail, dreamlike beauty that seemed like it would fade any time. The words that she spoke caused the flames on the ground to flutter— and Chris's heart as well.

—This woman...... What is she blabbering about?

—This...... Shouldn't those words be said by me? Are you not the Salt Spraying Soul Reaper?

—You're the soul reaper, so shouldn't you be the emissary of fate sent to kill me......

"You are called Cristoforo, right— Your face and the sword in your hands, they are the same as I had foreseen. "

Her words caused Chris to gasp— He had never told his name to anyone before. He always thought that his full name was known only to his deceased mother.

"Why...... Do you know my name?"

"You were the one who told me...... No, I should say that you told me after you killed me— And after that, your sword pierced into my heart, and then you started to weep."

Chris felt a chill on his back, making a guarded stance as though he was hugging his sword in his lap. While she — the girl pulled out her huge sword from the ground, calmly raising it before her. It could not be discerned whether she was in tears or laughter from the expression on her face. Looking as though she was having deep regrets or was trying to suppress the anger hidden in her heart, she bit her lips, causing her lips to appear red in agitation.

"I cannot escape from this night no matter what I do..... . Even now, I can only see the fate of myself being killed by you. While you— did you not come here just to kill me?"

—She-She already knew that I would come?

Chris held the hilt of his sword with trembling hands, trying to recall the rumors that he heard just now, the rumors spread by a meager amount of survivors who once stood before the 'Salt Spraying Soul Reaper on the Battlefield'— Before her, spears and arrows cannot even scratch her, she does not wear any armor, but cannot be harmed by anyone, as though the movements of the weapons were all in her grasp......

As though she knew everything from the start.

Chris lifted his sword. The insignias on the back of his hands and his forehead continued to release heat, as though 'something' hidden in his body was boiling out from his skin.

—Should I kill her?

—Should I kill this girl?

—Should I kill her, eat her flesh, drink her blood and continue to live......

—Yes, eat......

—Devour her...... Devour all of her fortune— Devour her......

The beast murmured in Chris's ear in a low voice, infusing power into his hands holding the sword.

That moment, the white flames standing on the hill of corpses shimmered, and the flaming red hair twirled in a circle— In a flash, white light dashed into Chris's field of view, and he saw the white-shirted girl with red hair appear before him.

Chris hurriedly lifted the huge sword in his hands, but was viciously blocked by his opponent. Swords clashed, creating sparks in the strong collisions. What was left on Chris's hands was a weight as though it was going to chop off both of his hands at the same time.

"How can I—"

The girl disdainfully spat out the words with a convoluted expression:

"How can I be killed by a person like you who are deluded because of power like a puppet, not even knowing what you are doing!"

A serious chill suddenly descended on Chris's back. He hurriedly focused all of his energy on his hands, pushing the girl's sword away and pushing her away as well. The radiance from the three insignias on him emitted a weak glow in the night. Just before the blades of the two clashed once more, their eyes met for a short instant—

Visible flames of anger could be seen in the eyes of the red-haired girl.

—I...... am deluded by my powers, not knowing what to do, like a puppet...... Chris's mind was still pondering his opponent's words.

"......Do you know about me? Even the brandings on me?" He asked.

"Did you not say them yourself, you told that to my corpse after killing me!"

The girl lifted the huge sword in her hands to block Chris's assault, while the strength of the parry almost dislocated Chris's hands.

"I do not care how many people you are planning to bury with you— If you really wish to die, you should just cut your throat. Why do you appear before me, and why do you block my road!"

The thick blades met again, creating sparks in the darkness.

"A person like you— A person like you, why don't you just look for a woman somewhere to replace your mother , hiding by her side forever. Is that not the best!"

The red-haired girl started her next assault in her cries. The huge sword in her hands slashed on the ground to create a trail, slashing in the direction of Chris's abdomen from below. Chris blocked the attack with his sword in the nick of time, but stumbled because of the power of the attack.

"Why do you come to battlefields! I did not see for only one time, and I did not see you pierce that sword into my heart for only one time! I could dissolve the other premonitions of death, but why is it that I cannot change the fate brought by you—"

The swords emitting cold light assailed Chris at both of his sides like a whirlwind. Chris was slashed, but he forcedly parried the astounding power by kicking at the soil below his feet and going backwards— He definitely could not increase the distance between him and his opponent, or he would definitely be shredded to pieces by her sword...... Chris supported his body with his knees bent, fending off the slash from above, and dashed towards the girl.

A strong force spread from Chris's shoulders to his ribs. He and the red haired maiden crossed blades, and glared at each other in the distance that they could feel each other's breath face to face. The girl's profound pupils reflected Chris's features.

"You repeatedly appear in my mind, causing me to be unable to escape your eyes!"

Hot breath came with her voice, and the breath condensed into droplets of water on the sword, causing the cold, metallic luster to fog.

"Why do you come, why do you block my road—"

The burning sense of the insignia caused Chris to be unable to refrain himself any longer. The roars of the beast covered the girl's questions in his mind.

—Eat her!

—Devour all of the fortunes of this person!

Chris's forehead was reflected in the girl's eyes, a totem-like insignia emitted a dazzling light.

—She knows about me!

—She keeps looking at me......

—If so, for her, I must......

"......What is your name?"

Chris's question caused the girl to furrow her brows.

"Tell me your name!"

"W-Why?"

"Because— Is this not the first time we have met!"

The girl forcefully pushed with the large sword in her hands, pushing Chris outwards as well. Her astounding strength of her arms caused Chris to shudder, but he still made a stance, preparing to meet the next attack. While... ... His opponent did not continue the attack. The girl stuck the large sword into the ground, standing there without moving while leaning on her sword. The killing intent in her eyes was already non-existent, and what took its place was a confused expression that was like flickering flames on a candle.

"......You...... You did not say something like this......"

Her voice sounded like a panicked, helpless child who was lost and looking for her mother.

"You...... You wish to know my name? Why? You had never asked me that before, never......" The girl said.

"What do you care!"

Chris's anxious voice passed through the whistling wind, faintly spreading into the girl's ears— As she kept silent while biting her lips, Chris knew that she heard it.

"You're not a soul reaper, right? You probably have a name, tell me if you do!"

Chris finished his words in one go, making a stance again while lifting the sword in his hands, swallowing his saliva that was mixed with sand at the same time.

"......You— You killed a lot of people that you don't know their names of! You never asked their names!" Though her tone was strong, the confusion in her heart could still be discerned from her voice, "If so, why—"

"Because you were waiting for me!"

Chris's words caused the girl's expression to freeze.

—In the past, I only had my mother. Even so, even mother left me in the end......

—I originally thought that there will no longer be any bonds that can tie me in this world anymore. However......

—However, this girl...... She was always looking at me, awaiting my appearance......

"I was not waiting for you!"

The girl pulled out the huge sword, swinging away the sand on it. She retorted as though she in desperation.

"But I am waiting for you!"

Chris's words caused the girl to be dumbstruck; her lips opened slightly but no words came from them.

—*Perhaps.......* The words resounded in Chris's mind—*Perhaps, I am just running in the battlefields for the encounter on this night......*

—Perhaps, I did it just to meet this girl here...... And then eat her.

The girl's lips fluttered, as though she was in a panic because of an inability to speak anything appropriate, and she finally resolved herself in the end—

"......Minerva."

Chris stared directly at the girl's face. Her voice echoed in his ears, while the clearness of the voice caused him to fall into a daze. The girl— Minerva shifted her gaze in embarrassment,

"What is with your expression, did you not ask me for my name!"

"Ah...... Mmm, I think your name is very beautiful......"

His words stunned Minerva for a moment, and she lifted her sword immediately blocking the slight blush on her cheeks.

"Ugh, What— What idiocy are you speaking!"

—This...... Yeah, what idiocy am I speaking......

—Between us...... One of us must die in the end, and we cannot continue to speak together like now......

Minerva's body leaned forward, and sounds of fluttering could be heard after she flung her white sleeves— In an instant, white flames appeared before Chris once again. Her sword, pieces of steel had long reached a height equal with Chris's gaze, viciously pounding on him with force.

*

Only once had Chris conversed with the beast living in his own body......

When he left the village that he had grown up in, the first mercenary squad that accepted him had been a team led by an old soldier whose face was full of wrinkles and had only one eye left. Less than a hundred people were in the squad, and all of them were old soldiers. Chris treated the others coldly, but was quite popular in the mercenary squad, being taken care of by the others like a cat that didn't follow people too much. In addition, most of them thought that Chris was a child who couldn't hear or speak.

In the mercenary squad, he passed a few nights of new moon without incident, and nothing that could be called unfortunate had happened. That had been because Chris escaped from the camp each time, and was brought back afterwards, and not many battles happened. However, the old mercenary captain noticed Chris's sword skills.

'This child seems to have a talent for being a mercenary!'

'Not only having natural talent for using the sword, his short stature exposed strong killing intent as well!'

'This guy has an expression that says 'Even if I don't have a sword in my hands, I'm gonna bite you to death as well!!'

'He'll become a great swordsman!'

The captain was quite good at reading people, and cruelly predicted Chris's future as well. The first time that Chris appeared on a battlefield was a battle in defense of a city. His original job was to send spare weapons to places in the city, but he unknowingly stood on the city wall while holding spears. He killed quite a few enemies by throwing spears, causing them to fall down from the wall. Because of his agitation, he did not notice the calls by his ears at all.

One night, the claw-like new moon rose into the pitch-black night sky. As the enemy forces destroyed a dam by the rivers, a flood destroyed the city gate. That moment, the only survivors were Chris, the captain and some other tens of people. The remaining eye of the old captain was pierced by an arrow, and he collapsed, while Chris subconsciously snatched the sword from the captain's hands with his glowing right hand. He did not remember anything about the battle after that......

When he came to his senses, he was already in wilderness. His surroundings were completely drowned in water, just like a city of water, while the rocks that jutted all around created short shadows under the faint moonlight.

When he turned around, he saw that the city that he had been guarding was in a sea of flames. The scene caused him to kneel down on the ground in confusion, blankly staring at it for quite some time. The pitch black night sky was roasted into a charred red because of the flames. In the end, Chris could not suppress the suffering that the scene brought him, and noticed the sword he held in his hands that he had snatched from the mercenary captain when he lowered his head. The sword was stained in blood, while the differing degree of dryness showed that they were blood from different wounds.

— You devoured all of them......

That moment, a voice suddenly rang in his mind.

—You devoured all of their fortunes, drank all of the blood that flowed from their bodies and lived on alone......

Chris stabbed his sword into the ground, his hands sinking into the river water that covered the whole land while suppressing the hot sense of disgust welling up in his throat— One time, Chris's village sank in a sea of fire as well, so was it possible that such a situation had happened once again? He did not know how many people he had killed, but the only person who survived was him......

—Yes...... Devour all of the people around you......

—Let you— Let me eat them all......

The beast in Chris's body said happily. After that, it answered Chris's questions for the first time.

"......You......"

Chris looked at his reflection in the water,

"Who are you...... Why do you live in my heart?"

It did not answer. However, the insignia on his forehead glowed as though it was laughing— As though it was right over there......

—I am the insignias on you...... It said— ***I will stay here forever, devouring the fates of everyone that you encounter......***

Then I...... Should I do as it says, sucking away the blood that flows on the people that I meet, then continue to live alone. ..... Forever, alone...... By myself......

*

Chris opened his eyes. A beautiful face paler than the new moon appeared before his eyes. The girl trembled slightly. She bit her lip, and her eyes were drooped, while the crimson hair before her chest hung just above Chris's throat.

Chris felt the chilling touch of metal by his cheek, and realized that a huge sword was just by his face, and understood that he was actually lying down on the ground. While the girl by his side— Minerva, she leaned on the sword by his face, kneeling down on the ground with one knee, her face hung before him.

Chris stood up while dragging his numb right hand, the sword in his hands far lighter than before......

—That's right, my sword had already......

—Been broken......

When Chris' sword had met Minerva's, he deflected his opponents attack, but after some collisions for a few more times, it was actually broken by his opponent from the guard. Minerva had continued with a full-force collision, causing Chris to faint in the strong assault.

—But why....... Am I still alive?

"Why......?"

Minerva's words fell onto Chris's throat, burning his chest.

"Why are you so weak......?"

Her voice choked, tears of unwillingness almost gushing out.

Chris did not understand. Chris did not have a chance to defeat his opponent before him even though the beast in him was active because of a craving for blood. However, the power that allowed him to live on alone in countless battles before him completely disappeared from his arms at that moment. Currently, he did not have any remaining energy to defend himself against his opponent's attacks.

He turned around to look at the back of his hand, and swallowed secretly— The illumination of the insignia disappeared......

—The beast's craving for blood disappeared? On the dawn before the night of new moon, its hunger for the fortunes of the others had already been sated? Such a thing has never happened before......

"Why, it should not have ended like this— You-You should have killed me!"

—This person...... What is she talking about?

—Shouldn't you be the one to kill me......?

"......You can see the future?" Chris asked.

In an instant, Minerva widened her eyes, and her eyes narrowed once more, and she pouted, "......I can see everything...... In the changing matters in the universe, only you continued to stop on this night, ending my life...... I changed everything, but I could not escape from only this no matter what......"

Minerva raised Chris' face with her hand. Coldness came from her fingertips, drawing the warmth from Chris bit by bit.

"I hear a voice...... A filthy voice...... The owner of the voice seems to be inhuman— What is with this?"

Minerva looked as though she wished to speak of the bitterness in her heart when she spoke,

"—Eat, the voice said...... Tell me, whose voice is this!? What kind of person are you? I can even see a bloodstained jaw, and then—"

Chris felt the fingers at the side of his head loosen......

"And I cannot see death anymore— Disappeared, why!?"

Chris did indeed feel what she said. That was the roar of the beast, a voice trembling in joy after its fangs were wet with blood.

"You should be bearing the fate of killing me, that is your fate. Why did it turn out like this!?"

"......I think......"

At the moment when Chris spoke, he felt like his voice was like a rapier that stabbed into his heart, but the feeling was indescribably sweet,

"I think, the fate that you spoke of was probably devoured by the beast in my......"

Hearing those words, Minerva's eyes that were like pellucid black jade clouded over. Shadows of confusion came from the depths of her profound pupils.

What is with this......?

Chris did not understand. The meaning of the existence of the beast that lived in him should be devouring the fortunes of the others, so that he could live on alone. On the day when he had left the village that he lived in, the village chief said so as well, and the beast in him said the same— Perhaps, the beast could devour the fate of one who was destined to die, letting the person live on......

—*Whatever......* Chris thought— *This is fine as well......*

—*If so, I can just close my eyes and sleep.*

—*Just let her eat me, and continue to live on......*

Chris closed his eyes, awaiting the sense of the chilly blade that had a hot sense of passion to pierce through his body.

......However— *smack*— What awaited him was a clear smack and a burning sense on his cheek. After that, a numbing pain spread slowly on his cheek.

"What are you joking about!"

Minerva grabbed Chris's collar, pulling him up from the ground. Chris opened his eyes, and saw Minerva, whose face was slightly red in agitation. After that, he was slapped once again.

"Do you really wish to die so much!"

Chris did not answer her questions, and just nodded as his collar was held. Tears filled the maiden's eyes, almost gushing out. The depths of her heart seemed to be in conflict, and were shaken by certain energy. That moment, her face that sank in pained emotions emitted a peerless beauty.

—Why......? Is she crying?

—The person that she wishes to kill is just a filthy beast......

—I am a beast, and I have no other choice but to treat such a beautiful girl as food, eating her to live on, is it not?

All of a sudden, Chris's face was attacked, causing the back of his head to bump viciously onto the ground. He saw the broken sword in his hands fall onto the ground as he loosened his grip because of the impact. He raised his upper torso with the resolution of death and faced Minerva. However, she had already sheathed her huge sword into a scabbard made of leather pads that was tied on her back, completely ignoring his wish.

In confusion, Chris lied down on the ground again, looking at the red haired maiden beside him.

"Stand." She said.

"......Why......?"

"Don't you mind and just get up. I am going back to the camp. You are my prisoner, and I am going to bring you back."

"Kill me."

His abdomen was attacked. Her kick caused Chris to roll on the ground in pain, coughing for a few times.

"You lost. You have no right to ask me what I am going to do to you."

That moment, words that he had not said to anyone these years surged in his throat. However, the words disappeared after a moment.

"......Why are you doing this?"

After a while, he finally spoke in a hoarse voice, "What can you do even if you bring me back?"

"I want you to be my slave."

"You know about me, right— About it?" Chris touched his forehead. "It can devour the fortunes of the others. The people who stay by my side will face a cruel fate. So.. .... Just kill me—"

"You should have been the one to kill me!"

Minerva's angry shout covered Chris's weak voice.

"But you devoured the fate that had been set. If so!"

She took one step forward, and another, and extended a hand to Chris,

"You must obediently stay by my side, devouring all of my destiny of death! If you are going to devour, you can only devour my fate."

All of a sudden, Minerva's voice overlapped with his mother's words in Chris's mind......

—There can only be me in your eyes.

—Eat my flesh.

—Drink my blood.

—And live on......

Chris decided to stay by her side, eating the premonitions of death that descend on her. If so, no other lives would be devoured by the beast.

—However, can I really protect her? Can I do it......?

—And I, must I continue to live on for this goal......

A gust blew on Minerva's red hair that was like flames, covering the new moon on the top of his head. Her wet eyes could be clearly seen even though she was against the light.

—Can I continue to live on for her......?

—Such a situation......

"Such a situation...... How long is this going to last?"

"Until the clan of the celestial kings are annihilated." Minerva said.

Chris could not help but gasp after hearing that.

The profound eyes of the girl seemed to be even deeper that time, as though they fell into boundless darkness.

Chris suddenly understood that the girl had actually walked alone in a night more dangerous than he had encountered, until she had met him at this place and this moment.

—I...... I did not make it in time to save mother. No matter how many people I killed, how many fortunes of the others that I devoured, I could not save her......

—But I met this girl. If so......

Chris held the hand extended towards him, Minerva's hand.

Chapter 4 – Flag of the Silver Hen

In the freezing weather before dawn, Chris and Minerva arrived before a conifer forest. As there were soldiers giving them a chase, they could not be distracted by searches for horses or camping tools. Even when it was further from dawn, they could still hear dense clatter of hooves and sounds of conversation of the enemy soldiers from below the cliff they were walking on across the river.

"Oi, but aren't we chasing the Soul Reaper? Didn't people say that she wiped out a squad of almost a hundred person singlehandedly?"

"It seems like she is using a huge sword that's like a steel plate. It's unmistakable now, she's probably the Salt Sprayer......"

"Hah! That's just a rumor! Stop scaring yourself!"

"Is that so? I saw her with a kid she found god knows where, but escaped with him without killing him. Would she do something like that if she were really some kind of Salt-Spraying Soul Reaper? Speaking of which, they weren't on horses, so they couldn't have ran away too far. ....."

Minerva was lying down behind a rock, and couldn't help but sigh when she heard the conversation.

"Hey, was the one you saw really a woman? You didn't make a mistake, did you?"

"Why should I lie? She wore clothes like that of a dancer's, and was a young, pretty little missy as well. Hehe, if she really was a Soul Reaper, I won't mind dying if I could have a round with her before I die!"

"But say, if we really catch that Salt Sprayer, I wonder how much money we can get."

The two soldiers exchanged gazes after saying that.

Minerva and Chris pressed close to the back of the rock on the cliff, silently waiting for the sounds of conversation and illumination of torches to distance themselves. The rope that was tied to Chris's neck was held in Minerva's hands. As he was already Minerva's captive, his hands were tied up with a rope as well. Being forced to navigate the pitch-black edge of a cliff in such a situation definitely wasn't easy. Because of that, with soldiers in pursuit, Chris could only obediently follow what Minerva decided on. After all, they had to conceal themselves in a place they could hide in before the sun rose.

Chris and Minerva still couldn't rest properly even when they trekked all the way into a forest. Silhouettes of soldiers holding torches on horses that raised clumps of soil when they flew past could still be seen outside the forest time after time. It seemed like the enemy army had sent quite a number of search parties in pursuit of them.

—Is it because she is with me......

Such a question couldn't help but surface in Chris's mind. He thought, if it was just Minerva alone, she should be able to escape safely.

"Stop thinking nonsense over there!"

Minerva called and pulled on the rope on Chris's neck, pushing him into a hollow formed by thick roots under a large tree. The space in the hollow was rather wide, and was enough to contain the both of them.

Morning was arriving. The morning light that passed through the gaps between the leaves illuminated the whirling mist. Twitters resounded in the forest. Although the both of them were hiding in a dense forest full of trees, if they walked wherever they wished before darkness fell, the enemy would definitely see them in an instant. Thus, they planned to hide in the hollow until night before continuing to move.

"We can probably escape if we cross the country borderline......" Minerva said.

"Where can you return? Aren't you the only one left as the whole Royal army was annihilated? In the siege, the Celestial army had troops more than ten times you had—"

"So what if they had ten times the troops? We can definitely break through with that amount of people."

—She's saying that her team is still able to escape even with the blockade of the layers of overlapping nets that are like overlaying silk cloths? Could such a strong unit exist in the Principality Union army formed by such a motley crowd? Minerva's statement couldn't help but surprise Chris.

"They're the Order of the Silver Egg, after all."

Minerva answered in a mutter. Chris was unable to suppress a gasp at the name that she mentioned. It was a name that he was extremely familiar with.

Order of the Silver Egg— it was an extremely peculiar group of knights under the flag of Zackaria. The said order used the emblem of a silver hen on their flag, and was at first a well-known joke in the Celestial army. They heard that the order comprised of mostly women and children, as though it was a group of sightseers who went on tours everywhere. They thought that it might be because of the fact that the order consisted of mostly people like this, they naively used emblem of a silver hen on their military flags, and was actually a crowd of innocent fools.

However, when the Seven Countries of the East united at Princinopolis, blowing the horn of revolt against the Celestial Kingdom, the Order of the Silver Egg was enlisted into the Principality Union army as well, and turned from a hilarious joke to a synonym of terror.

The Order of the Silver Egg was shrouded in mystery. Nobody knew how many troops the unit actually had.

They accomplished many unbelievable feats. For instance , the Celestial army was unexpectedly ambushed from behind when they launched an assault on them. A force of about seven times their manpower was sent to attack them, but fell into the situation where the whole army lost completely. All of them were rumors with seemingly exaggerated contents. However, they did indeed experience many important battles of varying importance and contributed quite a lot. That was unmistakable.

Because of that, both the Salt Spraying Soul Reaper and the flag of the Silver Hen were terrifying existences to the soldiers of the Celestial army. Chris never thought that there would actually be such a close connection between the two.

"They can definitely break the siege of the enemy forces......" Minerva approached Chris's side, repeating the same words once again while she bent down to sit, as though saying it for herself.

"So...... You're planning to bring me back to the Order of the Silver Egg?" Chris asked.

"Of course."

Minerva's answer caused Chris to bite his lip and lower his head. He was still hesitating.

Chris did not want to expand his social connections at all, and people definitely won't welcome him when they see him as well. If he stayed in the same crew for an extended period of time, things like the Beast Insignias on him and the source of its power would definitely be exposed under the sunlight one day. After that, he would be damned, have rocks thrown at him, and cursed in a malicious manner, just like the night when the villagers realized his existence......

He was unable to take such results. Hence, Chris would never allow himself to stay in the same team for a long time, and always navigated between various battlefields alone. Chris was troubled when he found out that Minerva was not working alone.

"......Why did you leave the Order you belong to yesterday night? Why did you break into the large formation of the Celestial army by yourself?" Chris asked .

"Because I was supposed to die alone in a sea of blood! "

After hearing that, Minerva grabbed the rope on Chris's neck and roared:

"If I don't leave the Order I belong to when I have such a fate, what would that result in? They will be dragged in , dying by my side!"

—That means, she feels that since she would die anyway, it was better to rush into enemy territory all alone without the company of her comrades, huh...... Chris brooded over her words.

However, after that, Minerva met Chris, and the fate that should have been inescapable was torn to pieces by the insignias on Chris, and was swallowed up. That was another unbelievable result.

—I thought that the beast in me would only devour the surrounding people's good luck, forcing the fate of death on them? Then why did it only eat Minerva's fate of dying, allowing her to survive?

—Is it because Minerva is a special existence?

"But......"

Chris knew that the topic had already ended, but felt rather conflicted as he was about to continue the topic. However, he still chose to finish his words:

"But I was at the battlefield that time. If you kept staying in your Order, you wouldn't have met me, and wouldn't have encountered your destined fate, would you?"

—If so......

—If so, I wouldn't have to feel so confused like I am right now.....

—If so, I only had to stand alone in the forsaken night all alone, and wouldn't have to face a situation like this......

"Those are words from someone who cannot foresee the future."

Minerva spat out those words indifferently, pushing Chris deeper into the hollow at the same time.

"If I continue to stay in the Order of the Silver Egg, you will encounter the Order because of my existence. That is how destiny works. This is a law of nature."

Chris swallowed after hearing that, his frozen gaze fixated on Minerva's face that was turned away.

—This is a law of nature.

—The change of all things in this world had been set from the start.

Such a statement was already common in the world. The same words were often used as lies or excuses of self-consolation by fat priests in churches or farmers whose properties were burnt down or taken away because of the war. However, the words spoken by the red-haired girl was heavy because of the exposed truth.

"......You, can really see things what will happen in the future?"

"Well, not everything."

Minerva erected her knees, nodded to Chris in affirmation.

"I can only see the future when it is related to pain." She said.

"......Related to pain?"

"That is correct. It includes situations when I might be hurt, when I might die, or when my body is about to feel pain."

Chris relaxed his breathing, trying to understand the significance of the words spoken by Minerva.

"And I cannot see it any time I wish to. For instance, when I am sleeping, my eyes closed, the predictions will be presented to my senses in the form of pain, and then the scene of myself dying will appear."

—So that's why. So that's why she used the word 'see' when she said that she would be killed by me......

"Apart from that, I can also see for an instant, under what circumstances would I encounter death at places like in battlefields."

Minerva murmured about the powers of her foresight, and hugged her large sword that was as tall as her in her arms.

Chris's heart was chilled, and couldn't help but shudder. He never thought that the Soul Reaper who sprayed salt on the battlefield would be such a terrifying person who could avoid harm due to the ability to predict the trails of javelins and arrows. And he did indeed witness the ability during their battle.

"So I cannot see the fate of everything. In fact, I don't want this kind of power at all."

The heat she breathed out when she spoke condensed to mist on the blade in her lap.

—Predicting a future related to pain......

—If her power of foresight included the pain of death that she might encounter each time, such a power is just too cruel......

"But I cannot see now." Minerva said: "All of the scenes that would appear before crisis struck have all disappeared. So, if we are noticed by the enemy now, even I cannot guarantee that we can escape in safety......"

"You don't need to risk yourself running away with me."

"Shut up. I'm definitely bringing you back. How can I easily give away my own life in such a meaningless arrangement of fate? I am bringing you away just because of this!"

As she spoke, Minerva's finger circled past the huge sword and pointed at Chris unceremoniously.

—She...... Was she in a pinch because of the pursuit of something......

Even though she wanted to cast of her fate of dying and survive, for some reason, the pale face reminded Chris of his face reflected in the pool of blood.

—So we are the same.....

—She and I are connected by an inseparable destiny. Only by eating each other's set fates can we start our new way of living, living on in a way that we wish......

—That is indeed so......

"......Got it."

Chris still had his head lowered. He raised his gaze slightly to an angle so that he could see Minerva from, responding to the red-haired girl who seemed to be muttering to the large sword in her hands:

"Just bring me along— Let me stay by your side forevermore."

—I won't let you die......

That moment, the resolve in Chris's heart allowed him to shoulder any discrimination that the members of the Order of the Silver Egg might do to him— *It'll be fine as long as I restrain myself. Just let me stay by Minerva's side as her slave, having only her in my eyes, forever listening to her words, forever answering only to her words......*

"I would like to ask you not to tell anyone of the fact that I have the brandings on me." Chris said.

"Of course I won't! But if you ate up any of the lives in the Order of the Silver Egg, I will definitely chop off your head there and then!"

—Great, that's great!

—Before that day arrives, just let me devour the death shrouded on Minerva— Let me protect her in this way, and live on!

"Then please untie the ropes on my neck and hands." Chris said.

"Why? What a joke! You're a prisoner, you know!"

"I won't run away. Besides, it's hard to move while being tied up like this, and it'll be troublesome if we're unable to fight if we meet any enemies along the way."

"Shut up. Who would dare to trust that you wouldn't run away? Besides, even if we had to fight the enemy, there aren't any weapons on you as well."

"I can snatch—"

"Stop whining and close your eyes!" Minerva shouted before Chris managed to finish his words, stabbing her large sword at the entrance of the hollow at the same time, "We'll continue moving after night falls!"

After saying that, Minerva stayed silent. However, Chris realized in an instant that she did not plan to sleep at all, because her jet black eyes were still fixated on the sky that gradually turned white between the leaves.

".......Aren't you sleepy? We've already journeyed throughout the night." Chris asked.

"How can I sleep with you beside me!"

"I won't do anything bad."

"I hate sleeping! I'd always see signs of my death as soon as I close my eyes....."

Hearing Minerva's answer, Chris could only stay mute while biting his lips as well.

—In her lifetime...... How many times did she see the omens for her death? How many times did she see herself being killed by me......

However, even though Minerva's manner was tough, she started to doze off as her consciousness blurred as well. Although she tried to hang on by supporting herself with her sword, after awhile, her upper torso fell to the side.

Flustered, Chris could only catch Minerva with his chest as his hands were tied up by rope. The warmth of Minerva's body radiated on his chest. She gave a slight snore due to the uncomfortable sleeping position. Chris looked at her face and relaxed for some reason.

—If things are really as she said, why did she come to the battlefield with her sword......

—If she left the battlefield, she should be able to avoid her own death, right......?

On the battlefield, the signs of Minerva's death were unavoidable. If she avoided it once, there would be a second and third future of death assaulting her...... If so, why did she stand on the battlefields filled with death again and again?

—That's right. I remember that she once said that she wanted to eliminate the houses of the Celestial Kings...... Maybe she has some sort of irreconcilable enmity?

In truth, there was another thing about Minerva that Chris felt curious of ever since meeting her. The manner of Minerva's speech was similar to that of a lady borne of nobility— Chris had once served some local nobility for some time as well, and had once learnt reading, writing and some etiquette between nobility due to their affection for him at the said mansion. Because of that, he could see that Minerva's every action was different from ordinary girls.

—Is she a girl from high class nobility? No......

Chris looked at Minerva's eyes closed in deep sleep and suddenly noticed that one by one, unusual coincidences were all focused on this girl.

Being able to see death......

Predicting the future......

The Oracle Decree of the Celestial......

She wanted to destroy the Celestial......

—You've got to be kidding me.

Chris shook his head furiously. He couldn't believe it.

All along, Chris believed that the Oracle Decree of the Celestial was just a swindle, and many people had the same thought as him as well.

In fact, many people thought that the declaration that the Celestial could predict the future because of divine revelation was a total joke, a symbol of power created by the Celestial Kingdom to make the nobility bow down under it. Not only Chris, everyone thought so.

However, his encounter with Minerva allowed Chris to understand that her power to see death was real. It was something that he understood after seeing it with his very eyes, and after his battle with her. He finally realized that there really were such powers of foresight in the world.

—But, how can this be possible......

—Something like this can't happen, can it?

Chris prayed unknowingly. He did not wish for the slender girl leaning on his chest at that moment to shoulder such a heavy burden.

*

Sounds of footsteps stepping on withered leaves rang in the woods, waking Chris from his dreams.

In the pitch-black forest, sounds of rustling due to the interlacing branches swaying continually could be heard. Moisture drifted in the air. It was raining.

That moment, Minerva was still leaning on his chest, shaking slightly in her sleep. Chris originally thought of waking her secretly, but footfalls rang by his ears again. This time, there was the voice of a man as well......

"......That branch just now had bloodstains as well."

"How nice if there's a wolfhound here......"

"On a rainy day, won't the scent be flushed away even if they left one?"

That moment, Minerva suddenly raised her head with her long hair that got messy in her sleep, waking up with a jolt on Chris, her gaze turning bright in an instant. Perhaps because she realized that her head was leaning on Chris, she frowned with her face flushed. Just when she was about to speak, Chris signalled her to remain silent with his fingers.

Minerva looked towards the entrance of the hollow, and subconsciously retreated deeper into the hollow—retreating to Chris's side.

"Since there's so much blood, won't that guy have died already? If so, we can easily claim our reward."

"Yes, Lord Cornelius said that he doesn't care if they're dead or alive."

"But I heard that we can get twenty pieces of pure gold Brigaeden coins if we catch this Salt Sprayer person alive! Why don't we get our reward there? After all, we won't be able to get much if we hand her to the General."

"Right now, everyone is putting the celebration party aside, searching for the people without an aim like headless flies."

"So it's because of that that the reinforcements still aren't here?"

"Isn't that nice? If so, we can just divide the twenty gold coins between us. Anyway, just don't let anyone else get it. Let's hurry up and search!"

Minerva couldn't help but breath in sharply when she heard their conversation. Even Chris heard it. Her slender fingers were tightly clenched on Chris's chest. Until the sounds of the soldiers' conversation and footfalls faded, and was hidden in the fall of rain, Minerva finally pushed Chris away and stood up from the ground.

"W-What did you do to me when I was sleeping!"

"......I didn't do anything at all. You were the one who fell asleep."

"Rubbish! How could I have—"

Minerva grabbed the rope on Chris's neck, and questioned him bluntly. However, it seemed like she knew that she was the one who fell asleep on top of him as well, and thus released the rope without finishing her words,

"......Blast it, how could I have fallen asleep in front of a person like you......."

She couldn't forgive herself for showing her embarrassing side, and gnashed her teeth while scratching her blade with her fingernails in annoyance.

"I didn't wake you up since I saw that you were sleeping soundly."

"What did you say!"

—*Is she angry? What is there to be angry about......* Chris distanced himself from Minerva in surprise, shrinking into the hollow.

"......Y-You really didn't do anything to me, right...... S-Say, touch my hair and the likes......"

"I said that I didn't. Can't you see that my hands are all tied up......"

"Ah, hmm......" Minerva looked rather embarrassed, with her feet fidgeting restlessly on the ground making pitter patter noises.

"Did you have any dreams......"

"No."

She pursed her lips, hugging her large sword and her knees in her arms.

"......Eh?"

"I did not dream of my death...... That was first...... Blast it, why— You, what is—" Minerva said.

"Isn't...... Isn't that great?"

"N-Not at all— " She furiously raised her head, her gaze meeting that of Chris's in coincidence. Her cheeks reddened in an instant, and she lowered her head quickly,

"W-What, that is none of your concern!"

"Actually, it's the same for me." Chris stared at the side of Minerva's face, "Even though there's an outsider present, I couldn't imagine that I could actually fall asleep as well."

—And having such an intimate distance between the two of us as well, being so close that we could feel each other's warmth......

"I just feel that there is this feeling that makes me feel safe with you...... It's really mysterious......" He said.

—Maybe because Minerva is stronger that me......

—Or maybe because the beast in me wouldn't gobble up her life......

Chris did not voice out his last two thoughts. However , Minerva seemed to have misunderstood something from Chris's first few sentences. She abruptly pressed a fist on Chris's hurt abdomen and twisted furiously.

"—W-What are you doing, it hurts!"

"Shut up, just shut up!"

That moment, they inadvertently looked at the scenery outside the hollow. Perhaps because of the rainy day where clouds covered the sky, they were unable to distinguish whether the sun had already set or not. However, it was so dark that it was already unclear three steps away from the hollow. Minerva spoke in a stiff tone :

"It's about time for us to set off— It looks like the rain will only get heavier, and not lighter."

"Say, from the fact that there were soldiers in pursuit just now, is the opening of the valley sealed?"

"If it's really sealed—" Minerva gripped her sword forcefully, "Then we'll break through by force!"

Looking at the sky through the densely interweaving shadows of trees, it could be felt that a huge shadow shrouded both the left and the right side, giving people a strangely heavy sense of oppression. It was the dark shadow of the cliffs at the two sides of the river valley.

Although it was unknown if the Celestial army had already spread out a binding net, at least this area would have formations of the enemy. Besides, there would be more than a thousand people in a team, so Chris really didn't think that he had a chance to break through in such circumstances......

—But if Minerva is here, perhaps......

—No, right now, she is unable to see images of the future.....
.

In the pitch-black forest, Chris could only rely on Minerva's vivid red hair as a guide as she walked three steps in front of him. He focused his energy on his hands bound before him— actually, it was impossible for Chris to break free through brute force with Minerva's way of tying the rope. But in his calculations, if they really encountered any danger, he at least had to prepare to use deliberate dislocation of the joints of his arms to free his hands from the rope.

Other noises started to appear in the pouring rain. Minerva and Chris stopped at the same time, looking around the pitch-black forest for each and every movement— *crackle crackle*...... The radiance of torches appeared in their gazes. Minerva immediately took off the leather scabbard holding her large sword and formed a stance......

—We're surrounded!

Footsteps made foreign noises as they moved the soil on the ground, metallic noises of swords and armor rang, torches made crackling noises...... The sounds formed a wall, surrounding Chris and Minerva from all directions. Among the fire, the outlines of a few sets of armor were slowly surfacing in the darkness of the woods......

Chris subconsciously started to estimate the number of enemy troops in the forest— *About a hundred, perhaps...... There are just cliffs on both sides, so we can only break out if we want to escape.....*

"Oi, look at that sword!" "Ah, it's that sword......" "I wonder how many men died below her sword......"

Among the enemy forces, sounds of gulping could be heard time after time. Even the faces illuminated by the torches stiffly showed indescribable fear.

"Nobody dares to be the rear huh......" "Damn, everyone'd better just be scared......" "She's a Soul Reaper. ..... Didn't the people who saw her say so......"

All of a sudden, a person threw the torch in his hands towards Chris and Minerva. The flames flickered in the mud, illuminating their appearance.

"......She's really a girl." "How young......" "Look! What kind of Soul Reaper is she! She's afraid!"

"Hehe...... This lass actually looks quite good. Would it be too shameless of us if we attack at the same time?"

"If so, the people in the search party would be too pitiful. Not only braving the rain, but having to return empty-handed as well."

"Hah, and if we wait for those people who ran away by themselves, I fear that they won't be able to enjoy it anymore......"

"T-These shameless scums......" Minerva gripped the hilt of her sword, her shoulders and neck trembling continually, exposing the fear in her heart without a doubt.

Chris was already used to the attitude of mercenaries who would get excited when they saw women. In addition, Minerva had such beauty as well. Chris was instead surprised of her reaction. It seemed like she never saw how mercenaries looked like when they saw women. If so, if they were really caught by these mercenaries, Minerva would have to experience shame more painful than death......

All of a sudden—

"You beasts, stop daydreaming! Don't you know how many of us she killed!"

Suddenly, a knight in full armor appeared in the forest before them. He pushed the mask on his helmet away, showing a scrubby face full of whiskers while shouting at Chris and Minerva:

"You're the remains of the Principality army, aren't you! It's better if you surrender obediently. If not, we won't let you go easily even if you're a woman. We'll kill you without an exception!"

"Commander, I heard that we'll get paid more if we catch her alive!" "Twenty gold coins!" "And isn't it a pity to kill such a great woman?"

"Shut up. Have you forgotten about Lord Cornelius's order— Archers, fire!"

On his orders, the soldiers holding bows brushed aside the weeds by their feet and stood at the front lines. That moment, the flames of red interweaved with white before Chris's eyes started to flicker once again. Without any need of communication, it was as though a pact was already formed between the two. He and Minerva dashed forwards in an instant, rushing towards the horizontal row on the slope before them. At the same time, the soldiers surrounding them started to roar, but it was unknown whether it was in anger or joy.

Excitement froze in an instant— Minerva's giant sword swept past, cutting the three armored soldiers into half from the abdomen. Large amounts of blood scattered in the rain.

"—Release the arrows, release the arrows— N-No, wait, we'll shoot our own men—"

The rider's roars of exhaustion were drowned in the confused wails of the soldiers and the sounds of metallic collision between armor and weapons. Arrows scattered in the air. A few of them were cut down by the large sword in Minerva's hands, but one of them grazed past her arm, forming a trail of blood— She could not predict the future anymore...... Chris realized the fact in an instant, and immediately rushed to Minerva's side.

"You go first, I'll block them."

Minerva shouted, dashing towards the archers lined up at the slope. The wind created by the sword whistled among the wails, while bent bows, broken arrows and chopped off arms danced in the air.

"Don't panic, everyone attack, surround her, corner her with javelins!"

The rider ordered while straining his throat. White flames continued to dance in the forest, the blade of the large sword shimmered, causing blood and pieces of flesh to scatter each moment the blade flashed.

"Force her to the edge of the cliff— Archers, scatter to the side!"

Chris saw the remaining archers scattering towards two different direction and immediately rushed forward.

"Minerva—"

On the same time that Chris shouted, numerous sounds of bowstrings being released rang all around them. Minerva finally realized the enemies' attack, and hurriedly raised the large sword in her hands. However, the clusters of arrows had long poured down from all directions.

"—Ugh— NGAAAHH!"

Chris couldn't hold back a wail of pain, almost falling on Minerva's back.

"Y-You—"

Turning around, Minerva's face was pale. She saw Chris block numerous bolts for her, and they were all stabbed bloodily in his side abdomen.

"Didn't I tell you to go first!"

"Didn't you tell me not to run away as well......"

"Idiot! That's because—"

Before finishing her words, Minerva pressed Chris's head down onto the mud. At the same time, she swept the large sword in her hands past Chris's head, chopping down numerous arms of spearmen and normal soldiers.

"I don't have any reason for you to help me!"

While blocking the spears and arrows, she started to walk backwards. However, she reached the side of the cliff in no time. It was pitch-black below the cliff, and nothing could be seen.

They were truly forced into desperation. That moment, the rider that seemed to be their commander already arrived at the bottom of the cliff, and was furiously waiving the longsword in his hands while ordering:

"Surround them! Surround them and use this chance to kill them in one go!"

Almost the whole row of spears that were thrust forward due to the order was blocked by Minerva's sword. However, two of them cut the skin on her thigh and side abdomen.

"—Ngh!"

Her clothes soaked by rain started to turn heavy, the blood seeping out from her wound dying her white clothes black. That moment, even Minerva's action of waving her sword turned slow. She finally realized that her hands weren't functioning properly due to the pain on her. However, Chris was rolling in the mud to avoid the enemies' swords as well, and did not have spare time to help Minerva out. The arrow wounds on the side of Chris's side abdomen were already spreading, and he could feel his blood and warmth seeping out little by little from his wounds. He lied down in the mud, and acknowledged in a trance that his consciousness was fading. Only his eyes continued to follow the silhouette with long, crimson hair in the rain......

—Minerva!

—I will not let you die. I definitely won't let you be killed!

—If you disappear, the support that I rely on to survive will cease to exist......

—I cannot allow something like this to happen......

"—AAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!"

Chris heard his own roar and felt the rope tying his wrists gradually burst apart. After that, raging sword wind that cut through the air pulled him back to reality from his trance.

His right arm was raised almost completely due to the urges of his reflexes, and he did not feel any pain when he accepted the blow of the blade that slashed downwards as well. The soldier waving the sword shrieked in fear before his eyes.

Chris grabbed the longsword he was holding, squatted down and pierced into the gap between his opponent's armor. The soldier whose weapon was stolen had his blood scattering all around in his wails, and he rolled downwards after falling on the slope.

With the corner of his eyes, Chris found the red hair dancing in the wind. He took a step backwards, and felt a cold, helpless body leaning against his body. Holding swords, Chris and Minerva faced the hundreds of soldiers who were gradually tightening their net of enclosure with their back to each other. That moment, the two of them were so close they felt that they could even hear each other's breathings and heartbeats.

"Why didn't you escape!" Minerva bellowed with her back on Chris, "These people have me as their target. You could have just stayed aloof without pulling out your sword!"

Chris flung away the blood staining the longsword, answering Minerva, who was leaning on his back, at the same time:

"Weren't you the one who asked me to stay by your side forever!"

"What, y-you— Why do you always speak words that are unfitting of the situation!"

"I'm your slave! I belong to you! I will neither run away nor hide! Not now, not in the future—"

Chris could taste blood mixed in the words that he spoke.

"I will devour all signs of death that descend on you!"

Minerva did not speak. Chris could only hear the breath choked in her chest, the surrounding rainfall and footfalls that continued to head towards them.

"Attack in one go and don't think of catching them alive!"

The leading knight commanded loudly in a high-pitched voice. After that, the soldiers holding spears and longswords sprinted towards Minerva and Chris while stepping on the mud on the ground. The two of them had their backs leant against each other and pressed their blades in their hands lower.

Chris looked at the soldiers who had ferocious beast-like gazes and subconsciously moved his hands. He broke the handle of the spear along with his opponent's arm with his sword, and continued with another attack that directly embedded the sword into his opponent's neck. When his adversary's body collapsed while spurting blood, Chris pulled the sword out of his flesh, swinging it at another soldier slashing at him from the side along the way and cut off his throat. The blades of the enemy flashed past Chris's body for a few times. However, the adversaries had Chris's blade swept across them on the next instant, their hands going missing as well.

Chris did not know how many people already died under his feet. In the bad condition of interweaving blood and rain, the chilly temperature and fatigue caused his arms to turn as heavy as lead, and almost couldn't lift them anymore. That moment, Minerva's ragged breathing could be heard from behind. His gaze was so blurry that he almost couldn't see how many enemies were left before him, while the loud cries of the enemy commander and the pouring rain seemed to gradually overlap, and was almost indistinguishable......

"Do we...... have a chance...... to break the siege......"

In such a bad condition, only Minerva's ragged breathing and incongruent words entered Chris's ears without exception. He looked the surroundings, thinking whether they had already disposed of more than half of the enemy forces, pondering at the same time of the possibility of escaping along the cliffs at the edge of the river valley. However, the shouts that rang behind him and the fire that surfaced in the darkness pushed him into the abyss of despair.

"Commander, the ones who went to search for them came back!"

"What were those people dilly-dallying for! They gave us a whole lot of trouble since they were absent!"

The soldiers who ran out of the camp to capture the Salt Spraying Soul Reaper alive returned in large numbers. Upon seeing that, Chris immediately pulled Minerva towards the opening of the river valley—Among the hundred over people before, half of them were left to block their road, rushing towards them.

"These two idiots, looks like we've cornered them. Everyone, charge!"

Ignoring their clamor, Chris gave a beast-like roar, dashing towards the centre of the formation of spears.

—Even if Minerva is the only one who can escape, I must still......

Chris steeled his resolve and swung his sword with all his might, ignoring the spears piercing his abdomen and wrist, while the commanding rider of the enemy frantically stopped the soldiers under him from running way under Chris's attack to avoid his formation from dissolving.

"Noooooo!"

Minerva's shout was almost a howl. Now, they could only survive by direct assault. Chris raised his weary arms and continued to lift the longsword in his hands. Because of blood, fat and shredded flesh, the blade finally bent after blocking numerous thrusts of spears. He grabbed another weapon from a corpse lying on the ground, rolling in the mud to avoid the enemies' spears and tripped his adversaries.

That moment, Chris's left arm gradually lost all feeling in the chilliness and sank into numbness. The slash on his abdomen caused him to finally be unable to support himself. His knees bent, and he sank into the mud. He heard Minerva calling his name in sorrow. The enemy commander laughed maniacally, pointed his sword at Chris and approached along with the blade-wielding soldiers.

—Just at that moment, the whistling of numerous sharp objects cutting through the air in high speed rang by Chris's ears. The whites of the enemy rider suddenly showed, and he fell forward into the mud with his eyes wide in shock.

"Commander?" "—AHHHHHHHH!" "U-Ugh!"

Wails arose while soldiers dropped down before Chris one after another. He stood up. Though his gaze blurred due to muddy water and blood, he saw arrows cutting the darkness from the other side of the river valley.

"What's wrong!" "Oi, OI! Where are these arrows coming from!" "The commander is DEAD!"

Cries rang behind Chris. The voices contained endless terror. It was because the soldiers saw numerous torches lit up in the woods behind their riding commander and comrades.

The firelight illuminated the emblem on the flag—

"T-That's—" "T-This can't be! Why......" "H-How can this be...... Why did they appear in this kind of place!"

The emblem of the flag was—

A hen with spread out wings protecting a silver egg.

"—Annihilate the enemy forces!"

An imposing female voice rang in the space sealed by darkness and torches. After that, Chris heard footsteps approaching, stepping on the water. Rows of soldiers wielding longbows came into his view. When he turned around, he could see the mercenaries hired by the Celestial army turning tail to escape. However, what pursued them was a rain of arrows heavier than the torrent of rain, causing the running soldiers to fall down one after another.

That moment, Chris was still lying on the ground weakly, blankly staring at the tragic battlefield of slaughter before his eyes, while Minerva leant against a withered branch of a nearby tree, panting with her face white.

Awhile after that— *Stop!*— The rain of arrows finally stopped after the command. The one who gave the order was the imperious female voice from before. After that, footfalls approached. Chris was already unable to counterattack, and could only turn around weakly while holding his sword.

He saw a crowd of people walking towards his and Minerva's direction while holding torches. Some riders who were at the center of the people holding torches clustered around a young female who was walking towards him. Her honey blonde hair shone. Her whole body emitting an elegant, haughty aura, and it was as though her high spirits caused the surrounding rain to be fear falling on her.

—Is she the owner of the voice who gave the command just now? If so, then she's just too young. And she's actually a female as well......

—She's the commander of the widely known Order of the Silver Egg, huh......

Chris could not believe it, but the truth was before his very own eyes, and so he could not doubt it anymore. The female with blonde hair wore a purely decorative extravagant shoulder armor and breastplate on her coat. Apart from that, a cape was shrouded over her as well, with the emblem signifying the Zackaria king embroidered on the right shoulder.

She walked past Chris along with her Guards and servants. Chris noticed that the blonde female was evaluating him with a gaze of curiosity. As for the other knights surrounding their liege lord, they did not even glance at him, and directly walked towards Minerva who was leaning against a branch, scrambling to show her concern:

"Meena, are you alright!" "Why did you act so recklessly by yourself!"

The blonde female at the center of the crowd pushed away the knights and servants, approaching Minerva's side before the others, "Sorry, Meena. If only we had come earlier! If so, your beautiful skin wouldn't have needed to be tormented by these flesh wounds......"

She combed Minerva's bloodstained red hair and said laughingly:

"It seems like I am the winner of the bet. Didn't I once tell you? The beautiful never dies."

Minerva pushed the blonde female's hand away in annoyance, "Shut up! I was supposed to die! So—"

"Oh, I know. You want to say, the reason you left the team by yourself was because you were worried we would be involved. But I won't accept the excuse of a sore loser like this."

"I'm not a sore loser!"

Minerva cried out in anger, but since she strained the wounds on her, she couldn't help but squat down in pain while pressing her side abdomen.

"Oh well, let's go back to the camp first before we start arguing happily. Those escaped soldiers will definitely come back again during recruitment." The blonde female turned to say to her subordinates:

"You, carry Meena to the horse cart."

"I can walk by myself!" Minerva said.

"Nooooope. Your precious skin and elegant limbs are my private property, so of course I won't let you do as you like— Speaking of which, Meena......" The blonde female suddenly turned around when she said that, her clear light blue eyes meeting that of Chris's, "Who is that cute boy?"

Chris raised his gaze to meet the gaze of the blue eyes, noticing at the same time that Minerva was looking in his direction as well. When Chris shifted his gaze to her, he saw Minerva abruptly averting her gaze. Until then, Chris finally felt relieved. Knowing that he survived, his muscles that got chilly and rigid because of the rain gradually relaxed as well. And the reason he had such a response might be because he saw Minerva's shy face as well.

"—He's my slave."

He heard Minerva's voice, feeling at the same time a warm, lazy presence drowning his whole body, soaking through each of his nerves, taking away his final breath. After that, Chris lost consciousness, as though sinking into a quagmire.

Chapter 5 – Proud Vixen

Francesca da Zaccaria accomplished many feats in her lifetime to be proud of. One of the most well known ones was that she had already refused marriage proposals of more than a hundred men in just her fifteenth year. She was the granddaughter of Duke Zaccaria, the leader of the Seven Countries of the East, and was both beautiful and talented since childhood. Thus, she was surrounded by many candidates picked by her father and grandfather to be her husband, but their proposals were promptly refused. Their attention only brought one sentence: "What a bunch of uninteresting fellows."

On the day when the number of men officially reached three digits, the old Duke Zaccaria who was usually gentle finally couldn't help himself from summoning his granddaughter to question her:

「*Fran, in the end, what sort of man will you be satisfied with?*

「*I want a man who is both stronger and more beautiful than I am.* Francesca answered.

「*It might be possible for one of your conditions to be met, but aren't the chances rather small for both of them to meet?*

「*Of course not. At least, there will definitely be such a person on the battlefield.*

Hence, Francesca started to frequent the training grounds of the knights, bringing an even larger headache to the duke's family.

Her father was disturbed by her peculiar actions, and thus summoned an old knight under his command.

「*What in the world is Francesca always doing among the knights? Is she observing your training?* He asked.

「*No, not only that.* The old knight answered.

「*Then she isn't training with you, is she?*

「*No, not only that as well.*

The old knight's answer shocked Francesca's father so much that he couldn't even straighten his back. Never would he have thought that Francesca was actually teaching the members of the knighthood how to improve themselves.

After a year, a large-scale riot occurred on the borders of Zackaria. Francesca departed with fifty elite knights, and with lightning speed, led her troops directly into the church seized by the rioters to be used as their base. She captured the leader of the rioters alive, suppressing the upheaval practically without any loss of blood.

The news spread in the neighboring countries, and a poet gave such an evaluation regarding Francesca's various performances: *Everything was like a ceremony to pray for rain. At first, there was an uproar caused by the campfire that was lit among great cheers of farmers and villagers, the inhabitants of the earth. Then, it was as though clouds darker and more turbid than ink were shrouded over the social circles of the nobility situated among the clouds, defamation that were continually spat out formed foul rainwater……*

Francesca's father and grandfather once scolded her together, asking her not to partake in barbarous activities unbecoming of those of a Duke's family. However, in the end their efforts were all in vain. Facing their reprimands

, Francesca said resolutely: **As members of the Zaccaria, protecting our land is in fact, a perfectly justified matter, and we have the obligation to do so as well!**

The elderly Duke Zaccaria did not usually anger easily , but when his tolerance reached its peak, he came to a decision by himself without care for opinions of the others. And the results that came to due to the failure of their reprimands was thus. The old Duke Zaccaria announced the renouncement of his seat, giving his title of the Duke to his son, handing the job of the Commander of the Knights taken temporarily by his son to Francesca.

「*If so, outsiders will not have any chance of saying that you are fooling around with the Knights. However, if you do not fulfill your responsibilities and obligations as a Knight, your actions will be judged by military law!*

「*That is exactly what I wish for!*

Just like that, the old Duke kept his hands off his beloved granddaughter, allowing her to wander the battlefields as she liked. After that, he summoned the

Knights in the city to the central courtyard as well, publicly announcing the shift of authority for the Knights into Francesca's hands.

「*Now, all of you are my subordinates, and I have already decided on a new name and flag appropriate for the Order!*

Francesca's words caused loud cheers among the knights lined up in the courtyard, and it was three years after that when the flag embroidered with a silver hen embracing a silver egg with its wings spread out fluttered in the bloodied wind of the battlefield, shaking up the entire Celestial Kingdom with its glorious feats.

*

"I was present as well when the flag of the Silver Hen waved at various battlefields. I was so excited each time we set out for expeditions that it felt like my asshole grew five times its original size."

The young military doctor in the team chattered on about the incredible feats performed by the Order of the Silver Egg on the battlefields while closing up Chris's wound. The stove by their side heated up the whole pot of water, its steam filling the whole tent; but the young military doctor blissfully telling his story didn't seem to realize it at all. He was called Nicolo, a vulgar, slovenly man. He had long, tea brown shoulder-length hair that was casually bound in a bunch behind him without much care. With his monocle on his nose bridge and his dashing features, he could be described as a handsome person. Although not visible from his features at all, he was once awarded a Badge of the Rose, and was a Knight to the letter.

"Actually, our Captain is a person who appreciates talent. Beauty or immeasurable strength, those who fulfill one of the two criteria will gain her recognition. Because of that, there is no end of cute girls even among our Captain's personal guard, such as Meena, Paola, and as for those who are currently absent......"

The military doctor counted names of girls on his fingers, while Chris listened blankly beside him. But since the number was too large, he was even unsure of what he should feel surprised at halfway through.

—What is wrong with this Order......

The leader was a duke's daughter just at an age of eighteen; the military doctor looked like an insufferable flirt, knights eavesdropping for information from the outside time after time showing their uncultured backgrounds, and there were even some who looked just like bad-hearted mercenaries as well, while the curiosity that overflowed from the their gazes when the looking at the captured Chris was almost as strong as enmity.

It was the first time he felt such an atmosphere in an army.

These people did not have cheap desires— that was what Chris sensed in the air. In the past, each of the troops that he saw was filled with the stench of beasts due to the strong desire for slaughter, coin or entertainment. However, the knights of the Order of the Silver Egg around him did not have such a stench at all, and the one who made the deepest impression on him was Minerva.

—That's right! Where's Minerva? Is she alright? If I'm not mistaken, she's hurt as well......

"Excuse me, Doctor......"

"Just call me Nicolo." The military doctor smiled, and immediately frowned after that: "Listen well, you cannot speak of the word 'Doctor' for a second time in the Order of the Silver Egg. It is a taboo more horrifying than the god of death."

Chris had never heard any mention of the fact. However, that was not important......

"How is Minerva right now?" Chris asked.

"Paola is probably taking care of her. Women have female medical staff to take care of them— it's all because of that Francesca, who made such an unreasonable request. If I'm in charge of everything, I'll definitely heal everyone completely, without fail...... Hey, where are you going!? Lie down! The injuries you sustained are much more severe than that of Meena's!"

Nicolo pushed Chris back to the bed by his shoulders. He even kindly covered Chris with a blanket, but such physical exertion was already enough to cause the wounds on Chris to throb faintly. He could not help but furrow his brows.

"That girl...... Is she alright? She was hurt rather severely as well......"

"Compared with yours, her's are actually quite light. Instead of talking about her, what kind of monster are you, seriously......" Nicolo said.

After hearing that, Chris shifted his gaze to the patch of tent above him and deeply breathed out in relief.

—She's okay, that's so great......

—After all, if she is not present in the future, I will not be able to live on as well......

" You're a mercenary of the Celestial Kingdom, aren't you? Why are you so worried of Meena? Are you really her slave?"

Hearing Nicolo's questions, Chris immediately turned around to ignore him.

"So what is it? Why don't you just tell me? What does it matter? You'll be asked these questions no matter where you go as long as you stay here anyway."

Chris raised the back of his palm to eye level, and finally sighed in relief when he saw that the insignia there had already faded into his natural skin color— it seemed like the military doctor was still ignorant of the fact that Chris was the Star Eater.

"Minerva and I met on a battlefield, and I became her slave since I lost...... It's just that simple."

"Oh, then the 'beast's son who has jet black hair as profound as the night skies' Minerva once said would kill her would be you?"

Chris couldn't help but gulp at those words.

It seemed like Minerva had already told the comrades on her team of what she had foreseen. But to what extent did she reveal the information? Chris heard a guarantee from Minerva that she would definitely not tell the others of the brand, so Chris believed that the people who knew of it in the Order of the Silver Egg should be few.

"She said that this day would be the date of her death, and so left the squad by herself." Nicolo said: "But when we started a bet, everyone bet that she would survive in the end, so the gamble couldn't be started— But isn't that obvious? How can anyone in this world kill her?"

—That′s true. Even the powers of the Beast Brand could not kill her......

—No, perhaps I should say that she was not killed exactly because of the brand′s power? This......

"Even so......" Nicolo said with his head tilted: "Why in the world did she bring you back alive? Did anything happen between you?"

"Ah...... Um...... That......"

Chris thought, if the military doctor who was good at getting familiar with other people found out about the brandings of the Beast on Chris, he would definitely look at him with a disgusted expression. Just thinking of that caused him to be unable to speak. However, just when Chris was stuttering over what he should explain, Nicolo suddenly showed a strange smile, making a conclusion over Chris and Minerva's relationship by himself: "Oh, so that's how things are? Well...... Indeed, if something like that really happened between you, it's true that it would be hard to talk about." Chris felt that he seemed to have misunderstood something, but he still did not answer in the end.

"There are five stitches on your stomach. Stand up slowly, okay. Can you put on your clothes on your own?"

Nicolo was not talking about the old clothing Chris originally wore that was stained by blood, but the brand new clothes that the squad prepared for him. When Chris wore the clothes, he thought in puzzlement over the reason he, as a captive, was allowed to wear clothing of such high quality. He only found something wrong after buttoning the clothes.

"Wait a minute, these clothes are?"

A flamboyantly carved sword accessory was hung on the chest position of the shirt, while emblems of a silver hen and a silver egg were embroidered at the area between the elbow and the cuff.

"This is the badge for Francesca's personal guards. As for the sword on the chest, it signifies that you have to keep Francesca's safety in your heart at all time." Nicolo said.

"W-What the heck is this! What were you thinking!" Chris couldn't help but cry out: "I'm a slave, why must I fight to the death for you!"

" Didn't I already tell you? Francesca wants to enlist you in her personal guards."

Chris was dumbstruck— *Me? In among the Captain's personal guard? This means...... I'm supposed to become a member of the Order as well?*

—What a joke! If things really turn out that way......

Chris was worried that the fact that he was the 'Star Eating Beast' would be found out not long after. People might even see the Beast brandings on him. If so, he would be cursed and resented by the members of the squad. If even Minerva couldn't suppress the beast in him one day, he might have to eat up even the members in this team......

—I-I definitely won't let things turn out this way.

With a resolution of only being the slave by Minerva's side he was unprepared to come in contact with any other person in the team......

"Hey, can't you be a bit more contented? You're becoming a member of the Captain's personal guard, you know? You can sleep in the same tent as her, call her directly as Fran, and there might even be a chance for you to change her clothes for her! What is there to dislike ? If you're not willing, then let me take your place instead !"

"Nicolo, if you have finished your work, can you directly stitch up your mouth as well?"

All of a sudden an unexpected sound rang, causing Nicolo to grab the dagger on the floor in shock. But when he realized who the owner of the voice was, his shoulders convulsed furiously as his shoulders froze. Chris looked back in shock as well; the one he saw was the blonde girl he encountered before. She was standing at the cramped entrance of the tent.

"Hello, beautiful beast." She walked into the tent. That moment, all of the armor on her was completely taken off , and the dress with an open chest did not look like clothing worn on a battlefield at all. The eyes that were like sapphires abruptly approached Chris, causing him to bump into a post supporting the tent when he walked backwards.

"Nicolo probably told you about the squad badge, didn't he?"

Hearing Francesca's question, Chris's lowered eyes saw the sword ornament tied to his chest, and forced out an answer after raising his head: "I am from the Celestial Kingdom, and so cannot be your comrade."

"Aren't you a mercenary? Besides, isn't your employer already missing?"

Francesca's rebuke made Chris speechless. Not knowing how to counter her, he could only nod when he stared at Francesca's mysterious expression.

"Listen well......" Francesca said: "Meena was the one who took you back, and she is my subordinate. So you are my belonging as well. Do you understand now?" She pressed her hand on the side of Chris's ear when she spoke, gently sliding her soft, chilly fingertips to Chris's chin, as though she was teasing him, "For me, I will not be satisfied even if the soldiers around me are as much as the stars in the skies, so your participation can be said to be irreplaceable to me as well."

"Why—?" Chris swallowed his words halfway through — *What is wrong is with this Order? Normally, won't any other daughter of a duke be nestled up in her own city, indulging in luxurious dresses, balls, and other people's gossip*

? Why did this woman lead an army to war? Might it be possible that she is really treating the troops her father entrusted to her as a toy......

To that, Francesca shrugged and smiled superficially: " I'm not thinking of bringing down the Celestial Kingdom just for fun."

Her answer stunned Chris to silence— *Bringing down the Celestial Kingdom?*

From what he was aware of, no matter how powerful an aristocratic House was, they would only cause uprisings to get land, military force and taxing rights from the Celestial Kingdom, but never did anyone make the grandiloquent declaration of overthrowing the Celestial Kingdom. However, the little girl of eighteen before his eyes......

While Chris was stunned in awe, the tent entrance was flipped open once again.

"Fran!"

This time, it was Minerva who rushed inside. That moment, she had already taken off the cape pinned to her sleeves, exposing her white, slender shoulders. With bloodstains on the bandage covering her wound on her waist, her fragile body would make people's heart ache. It was hard to associate her with the 'soul reaper' nimbly waving a large sword no matter how you looked at it.

"Don't you do things on your own accord. He is my belonging!" Minerva shouted in agitation.

"What is he to you again?" Francesca asked in nonchalance.

"I said, he's my slave!"

"Did you already forget, there is a rule in the Code of the Rose which says, 'without my permission, battle spoils cannot be taken for yourself.'"

"Ngh......" Her words caused Minerva to lean unsteadily against a post and supported herself on it while protesting weakly:

"But...... He's a person, not a thing, so he can't be counted as a battle spoil....."

"But didn't you say just now that he's your belonging?"

"Ah, ngh......."

Minerva's face reddened in anger. Her hand gripping the post tightened abruptly, causing the wooden post to creak in response. Seeing her reaction, Nicolo hurriedly ran forward with his face pale, "Hey hey hey, what the heck are you doing! Are you thinking of tearing down my tent? Calm down a little! How can you win against the Captain in an argument? You didn't even think of the fact that your brain isn't that quick from the star—"

Thump— Minerva's fist lashed out, hitting Nicolo away in an instant. Chris barely managed to catch the tall man, causing his wounds that were just stitched to throb in pain.

"Sorry, sorry, thanks a lot......" While apologizing, Nicolo rose, a flaming trail of nosebleed on his face.

"Say that once again if you dare, and we'll see how quick your brain will twist!" Minerva cried out in anger. However, the shout caused a severe pain in her wounds, making her press her side abdomen. That moment, another person ran into the tent.

"Meena, I haven't finished dealing with your wounds yet. You can't just run off like this!"

The girl wore a brimless hat and donned a blue, triangular cape. It seemed like that was the uniform for the medical soldiers. The medical staff looked similar to Minerva in age, or was perhaps a few years younger than her. There were even a few locks of light brown baby hair at the side of her youthful face. Seeing the disaster in the tent and her liege lord standing before her, she couldn't help but cry out with her hand covering her mouth and her face pale: "Ah! Lady Fran, my deepest apologies!"

"Paola. Haven't I told you that you must tie up her neck when you are handling Meena's wounds? She doesn't get hurt often, so she hates the medicinal odor."

"What do you treat me as, a dog?!"

"N-No, Meena ran out in a rush when she heard Lady Fran discussing about the entry to the team with the captive......"

Seeing the two squabbling before her, the girl called Paola added on in support of Minerva after looking at them timidly. From beside, Nicolo spoke by Chris's ears in a low voice, "You two are actually rather similar......"

However, the words seemed to be overheard by Minerva, and she immediately shot a look as sharp as blades across Nicolo's heart. Judging that the situation was not good, the military doctor hurriedly hid behind Chris without regard for his own pride.

That moment, Francesca spoke while holding Minerva's hand: "Why do you refuse to let this beautiful beast join us?"

"This—" After hearing her question, Minerva first glanced at Chris, and then stayed mute after looking around at the people present. Then, she said: "Because...... Because I must keep him by my side. If not...... It'll be...... dangerous, if he is allowed to approach the others......"

"So the two of you are so close that you're inseparable? " Francesca added quickly.

"Don't explain it in such a way! That is not what I mean! He is just my tool, and nothing else!"

—What in the world are these two talking about......

Chris was dumbstruck, and even then, Nicolo still refused to behave, and interjected: "This is the man she saw every night even in her dreams, of course she won't let him g—" Before finishing his words, the gauntlet that Minerva tossed over crashed heavily on Nicolo's forehead, causing him to bend down in pain.

After seeing that, Francesca sighed and said: "Paola, have a look at Nicolo. No matter how much he bluffs of his greatness as a doctor, I think he won't be able to deal with injuries on his own face. Well then, welcome, beautiful beast."

She changed topics in a flash, taking Minerva and Chris out of the tent at the same time, passing through the center of the camp.

Under the evening skies, smoke curled upwards from the porridge stewing in the campsite...... A whole day passed since their return. Night was about to descend.

Military tents were erected everywhere. All the soldiers in the Order sat around the campfire. When they saw Francesca walking by with Chris and Minerva, they nodded to their liege lord one by one, glaring at Chris who was walking behind her as well.

Among their murmuring voices, Chris heard the word 'Star Eater' and froze on the spot.

—Someone knows of me!

—Is it possible that there are even people among the Principality who heard of rumors about me?

"Hey, you guys know of this beast?"

Francesca heard it as well. She stopped and questioned her subordinate sitting by the campfire.

"Of course! He has quite the famous name!"

"Captain, did you see the armor that guy was wearing? Each part of the set is first class stuff of the highest level. However, not one of them was of the same set."

"There are some with emblems of Duke Houses, some with art hand-drawn by noblewomen, and even some of the exorcism pictures of the Church. How could anyone get such an assorted set of armor together?"

Hearing their descriptions, Chris couldn't help but avert his gaze.

"All of those were probably robbed from famous Generals or Knights after he killed them."

"Actually, it's still fine when we hear the name 'Star Eater'. It's the people of the Celestial Kingdom army who would get scared out of their wits after hearing it."

"I heard that an army with him would definitely perish ."

Thus, quite a few gazes were focused on Chris. Even when he looked away, he could still feel the gazes full of enmity piercing his body like a thousand needles.

"Meena, why the heck did you bring this guy alive? Wasn't this guy supposed to kill you?"

"That's right, you should have chopped off his limbs, leaving him alone on the battlefield."

Just when Minerva was about to answer, Francesca stopped her with a flourish of her hands, speaking ahead of her instead:

"He's joining my personal guard."

The words caused the soldiers surrounding the campfire to stand up as well. Even the people slightly further away from them gulped and almost stood up together as well.

"Captain, are you serious?!"

Among them, an impatient soldier who was the eldest, and had a large scar on his face approached, questioning Francesca in a distance so close he almost pressed against her.

"Putting this guy in the Order is just bad luck. Please don't do something like that!"

"If we let him stay in the Order, who knows what trouble he would bring!"

"You're just plainly ignoring the lives of your comrades if you do this!"

The words pierced Chris's heart one after another. However, it was actually quite normal for them to have such reactions.

—Never mind......

—Just let me be a slave of my own will, just like a rusted hoe kept in a store by a farmer......

—Please don't drag me into this team......

"Are you doubting my decision?"

Facing her subordinate's objections, Francesca tilted her head, halting everyone's discussions with a loud, imperious voice. The soldiers who continually jeered at Chris paled, not daring to make the slightest sound.

"You think that the Order of the Silver Egg trained by me, Francesca da Zaccaria, directed by me in warfare strategy will lose to the misfortune wrought on by such a cute beast?"

Francesca's imposing presence covered that of the soldiers present. After they exchanged gazes with each other, all of them knelt down, bowing down before their Captain. The scene shocked Chris into a daze.

The blonde girl with a startling imposing manner lowered her head to look at her subordinates, and berated right after that:

"How many times have I told you not to forget your pride as a member of the Order of the Silver Egg? The pride includes the honor signified by the flag you are under, your liege lord's name and your own pride!"

After saying that, she turned around, while Minerva chased over while saying in displeasure:

"Look, everyone had such a reaction just because you wanted to enlist him into your personal guard. This guy is a mad dog. You can only order him around as a slave with a collar on his neck......"

Chris knew that Minerva was having a headache over how she should keep him by her side as well, and if Chris's presence caused harm to the Order's safety, Minerva would probably kill him without hesitating. However, if Chris were to become a member of the Order , she could not do that anymore.

"Meena, do you mean to keep this beautiful beast all to yourself?"

"That is not what I mean!"

"Excuse me...... Francesca......"

While Francesca and Minerva were bickering, Chris called the young Captain before him as he walked to a shady spot in the tent behind them.

"Just call me Fran. You are the fifth person to get permission." Francesca turned around and said while pointing at Chris.

However, facing the goodwill of the daughter of a duke, Chris instead caught hold of the sword ornament tied to his chest and handed it to Francesca after tearing it down with its band.

"What are you doing?" She asked. With her head tilted, she stood before Chris like a cat that caught sight of its prey.

"I cannot become your comrade, because I am a harbinger of misfortune no matter where I walk. No matter where I go, I will be resented, cursed by the people like just now."

Before realizing it, Chris almost let slip the fact that he had the Brand of the Beast in him as well, saying that he was a beast that lived on the lives of other people, but he still held back in the end. After all, he would be unable to continue staying by Minerva's side if such words were spoken.

"I don't care what other people say. The most important thing is how you yourself think, isn't that right ?"

Francesca's denial caused Chris to be struck dumb momentarily.

"Besides, don't you have a reason to stay by Meena for ?"

In a double-team of the elegant Lady's gaze who could see through people's thoughts and Minerva's gaze that was chilly as heavy lead, Chris nodded vaguely, "I-It's..... true that I wish to stay by Minerva's side, but......"

"—! You— Can you please mind how you speak!?"

After hearing that, Minerva struck Chris with an elbow hit, causing him to see stars.

—Why did she get mad? Isn't things exactly so......

—Henceforth, I will always...... always stay by your side, devouring your fate, eating up your destiny of death......

"Oh my, fine, fine." Francesca widened her eyes in feigned shock, smiling while she walked, "It's just great, Meena. How good will it be if I could hear someone say that to me."

Seeing Francesca's hand that was approaching her, Minerva pushed her's away abruptly, walking two steps before Francesca after that.

"Anyway, your reason cannot be disclosed, right?" Francesca asked once again. However, Minerva gave a ' hmph', while Chris nodded as well.

—How can we disclose this......

—How can I tell the others that I am actually a beast who lives on the fates of the others?

"Very well. Forget it. Anyway, I've already decided. Since I like this beautiful beast, I am enlisting him in my personal guard."

That moment, the three of them were passing through another campfire. When the soldiers around them heard Francesca's words, they glared at Chris in surprise.

"Captain's personal guard......" "We're talking about that guy?" "Captain is making reckless decisions again...... ." Chris could not help but feel a blow when he heard the discussions around them, and lowered his head to look at his feet.

—In such gazes and disparagement...... How can they fight by my side in companionship......

"Besides, this beautiful beast probably knows nothing but fighting, isn't that right?"

Hearing Francesca's voice, Chris came to his senses after a moment of shock.

"You said that you're keeping him as a slave, but what can he do? You aren't thinking of letting him dress you up everyday, are you?"

"N-No...... This...... Well......" Facing Francesca's questions, Minerva stuttered, not knowing how to answer.

"Look, the people around us would have less to say if I keep him by my side instead. If so, it means that he's by your side as well, so please think better about it."

Francesca said.

Chris did not speak, and brooded over the words of the young Captain.

In fact, she might have been right as well. After all, his identity as the 'Star Eater' was long known. If so, as long as he stayed in the Order, no matter as a slave with his neck tied up, or fighting with the others while holding a sword, such enmity would not disappear. If so—

Chris nodded to Francesca's opinions, while the young Captain narrowed her eyes in a smile in satisfaction as well, nodding in response to Chris's affirmation.

Thus, with uneasy emotions, he tied the sword ornament that was not yet handed out back on his chest.

—Can...... Can I really protect the others......?

—In the past, I was a beast who devoured the fates of other people all along. Can I really protect Minerva?

Chris thought in his heart. If the night of the new moon descended, and even Minerva was unable to suppress the beast on him, he would have to escape by himself. If so, he only had that choice as well......

However, to Francesca's statement, Minerva objected while pursing her lips:

"You want him to join your personal guard, but you decided without getting Gilberto's agreement. That guy will be angry."

"Even though he's the captain of the personal guards, he does not have the right to object to my decision as well. Besides, Gil isn't even here anyway."

"Not here? Why?" Minerva asked.

"I asked him to sneak into an enemy campsite, but I think he's about to return soon."

"Sneaking into an enemy campsite? Why? Aren't we already retreating?"

Facing Minerva's question, Francesca patted her on her shoulders.

"How do you think you were saved in the river valley? It's because of Gil asking the mercenaries of the Celestial army to catch the Salt Sprayer by offering gold coins as a reward that the net of enclosure you had to face in the end got weaker."

Hearing that, Minerva's eyes widened. She froze, while Chris had the same reaction behind her as well.

So that was what happened. Minerva and Chris did indeed hear the soldiers on their tail mention while searching for them that another person was willing to pay more for them alive, compared with the money that Cornelius offered.

—So they used the tactic of dispersing the enemy forces......

Chris thought, the act of fearlessly scattering money in the enemy camp was just too reckless.

"That's why, when Gil returns, you'll have to thank him properly." Francesca said.

The tent of the Order of the Silver Egg's captain was far more lavish than one would have imagined, as though a bedroom in a noble's palace was completely duplicated there. The large bed in the tent's bedroom was stuffed full of feathers that seemed to be able to drown a person. The large flag signifying the dukedom and the Order that alternated in gold and silver was hung between the posts. The position at the bedside where armor was supposed to be hung was furnished with a galore of enchanting dresses. The dishes served by the servants were so sumptuous that it would cause people's eyes to widen.

"You're still hungry, aren't you? Have a seat." Francesca said.

The menu included roasted pies with a soft texture that were filled with apple fillings and extremely fresh meat products. Those were all delicacies that Chris never had a chance to consume in the army.

Although the food on the table looked mouthwatering, and definitely won't taste bad, to Chris, they were all dishes unsuited for his appetite. Added with the fact that Francesca and Minerva's gazes never left him as they dined, he only dared to consume some drinks and cheese .

The red wine there weren't sour at all, and was excellent wine. From that point, the Order probably had alcohol fermentation equipment as well.

—*Speaking of which......* Chris raised his gaze and glanced at the two girls by his side, thinking that the dining etiquette of the two were just too particular, as though they had forgotten that they were actually in a military camp. Bread had to be tore off with the hands before putting them into the mouth, while chewing had to be done in small bites so that the cheeks would not swell up...... It was understandable to Chris that Francesca ate thus, but it surprised him to see that even Minerva did so.

—*It's the first time I encountered such a strange, uneasy feeling......*

After they finished eating, Francesca actually shocked them by saying:

"I'll sleep in the center, Paola sleeps on the left, Meena sleeps on the right. As for you, you can sleep on the area below our feet."

"Wait a minute!" Minerva shouted with a flustered expression before Chris even spoke: "Are you inviting him to sleep with us?!"

"But of course. He's a member of my personal guard."

"But doesn't Gilberto sleep at other places as well? And he's a man as well—"

"That's because Gil himself was unwilling to do so. As for me, as long as they're beautiful, I won't mind if they're men or women. Besides, won't it be great if we have such a beautiful beast as a footrest when we are sleeping?"

Chris's eyes widened, and fell into a daze. However, his brain started to buzz in slight pain.

—This woman...... isn't crazy, is she?

"Even if it's fine for you, Paola won't be willing as well! " Minerva frantically tried to change Francesca's opinion.

"Eh? Does that mean that you aren't unwilling?" Francesca asked.

"Of course not!"

That moment, sounds of approaching footsteps came from outside the tent. Chris reflexively touched his belt, but there wasn't any sword hanging there. The footsteps sounded light and rhythmic. If not for the metals on his armor clinking, it might have been hidden by the two women's bickering in the tent.

It was the footsteps of a veteran on the battlefield.

"Lady Fran, I have returned."

When they looked around, they saw a tall man at the entrance of the military tent. He had gray hair shaved extremely short, eyes that were as bright as marbles, while his graceful features looked like a profound lake encased in a thin layer of ice.

The man wore black armor, but the armor could not hide the body it covered that went through numerous trainings and his hardened limbs. However, his longsword fixed to his waist was probably the most eye-catching thing about him. The arc of the sword's body was extremely graceful. It was most probable that the sword was just covered with a holster of knots as a suitable sheathe could not be found for it.

"So you're back, Gil. Listen, I was just talking to Meena about the problem of increasing the size of the bed."

The words caused the man to shoot a look as sharp as a nail at Minerva, fixating abruptly on Chris, leaving only after that. He looked back at his liege lord. There was a short sword hung on his waist, and the emblem of the Order carved on it was owned by Chris as well. It seemed like he was the leader of the Captain's personal guard, Gilberto.

"Due to the increase in numbers of my personal guard, this bed will not be enough anymore." Francesca said.

"Can we please discuss this matter only after we return to the country." Completely ignoring his liege lord's high spirits, he coolly poured cold water on her. After that, he said in a stern voice: "The enemy assigned an assault team to attack us in two directions. They'll probably reach us in about half an hour."

Chapter 6 – Battle of Retreat

Francesca laid the map down on the floorboards in the tent, while Gilberto placed two cobblestones on the map to represent the two units of the enemy. One of them departed from the river valley Chris and Minerva escaped from, and were heading towards the camp of the Order. On the other hand, the other unit was assaulting from northwest.

"The numbers and branches of the army units?"

"Two thousand cavalry each."

Hearing Gilberto's report, Chris couldn't help but clench his fists in tension— *Four thousand cavalry, it's four times the people here...... And judging by their speed, we don't have time to escape at all......*

"That's quite the big parade of an attack. Perhaps they already found out that their adversaries are we, of the Order of the Silver Egg?"

"Most probably, I think it's because I scattered too much money in the enemy camp. My apologies for this."

"Never mind that. It's thanks to you doing that that Meena is safe."

After saying that, Francesca walked out of the military camp. She loudly gave the order for the soldiers outside to dismantle the tents, and then sounds of metallic greaves bumping together rang outside the tent. Chris gripped his arms, gazing downwards at his fingertips while listening to the sounds by his ears.

—The enemy is here...... Is it because I am here?

The night of the new moon had just passed. He thought, the assault by the enemy might be the misfortune brought on by the influence remaining in the beast in him as well.

Francesca continued to give orders to the soldiers outside, causing the hustle outside to become louder and louder. That moment, Gilberto approached Minerva's side, while Minerva turned around with a look of guilt.

"When did you return?" Gilberto asked.

"......Yesterday."

"I don't care what kind of future you saw, but your actions were already that of one abandoning the Order, running away."

Minerva's hands gripped her arms, causing Chris to almost speak out in defense of Minerva.

"I know. I am willing to accept punishment." However, as though she was deliberately stopping his action, Minerva hurriedly answered in a low voice.

"I do not have the authority to punish you, but I wish to know what Lady Fran said." Gilberto said.

"I said, I'm letting the issue rest if she hands over the beautiful beast." Francesca returned to the camp right that moment, and continued with an exceptionally bright voice: "Alright, it's about time for us to retreat."

However, Gilberto ignored her and pointed at Chris while saying: "Why is this person in Lady Fran's military tent? Isn't he an enemy? We should kill him directly instead."

"Wait a minute! Gilberto, he's my slave, I brought him back—"

"Since he looks so cute, I'm enlisting him in my personal guard— Gil, teach him the rules here properly."

"I have heard about this from the soldiers outside. Please don't make a joke like this! Do you know what kind of a person he is? I heard that it's all thanks to this person alone that the army of the Celestial Kingdom brought down Dekrecht and Raborazia!"

"I know that." Francesca answered nonchalantly. Chris froze in her nonchalance.

"Do you know why I said that it's all thanks to 'this person alone' as well?" Gilberto asked with his eyes narrowed.

"Of course. It's because the Celestial army devised plans of sneaking inside more than ten times, and all of the squad members died with only him being the survivor, isn't that right?"

—She actually knows even these details......

—Then were the efforts I did to hide my identity all for naught?

Even though they did not know that the reason was the Brand of the Beast on Chris, he already knew what would occur to his surroundings. The fact before his eyes caused Chris to have the illusion of his feet sinking into icy water, drowning gradually. This caused him to avert his gaze from the other three.

"The 'Star Eater' is but a myth. Even Gil believes in that ?" Francesca asked.

"This is not a myth. It is possible for even ordinary people to do things like this. In other words, it is very much possible for him to kill his other comrades so that he could escape alone."

Gilberto's words caused a fire to flare in Chris's mind. He subconsciously stood up to grab Gilberto. However, without even flinching, Gilberto rapidly caught hold of the hilt of the sword on his belt. Then, Chris had the illusion of the world splitting into two. In a flash of light, his hand was caught. His body shook reflexively in surprise. On the other hand, Gilberto's half-unsheathed sword was pressed down as well, causing his facial muscles to convulse.

Red hair fluttered between Chris and Gilberto, falling on the slender shoulders of its red-haired owner.

"Stop it, idiot!"

Minerva was the one who grabbed Chris's hand. They failed to notice her movements due to her startling speed , as though it was a wall of flames that rose and fixed itself between Chris and Gilberto.

"You as well, Gilberto—"

Minerva caught hold of Gilberto and scolded him. However, Chris's consciousness sank into a daze, and was already unable to hear what Minerva was saying.

—What...... What did I extend my hands for just now......

—He said that I killed my comrades so that I could escape alone...... Did I move to deny his statement? Or was it to explain that all of that was done by the beast in my heart?

—But wasn't that the truth? As he said, I...... I......

"Look, the pair of beastly eyes." Gilberto put away his longsword and took a step back, glaring furiously at

Chris at the same time, "Are you planning to keep a ferocious beast like this by Lady Fran's side?"

"He is my property!" Ignoring Gilberto's words, Minerva determinedly approached him, "I will suppress him, and will not allow him to make trouble. Let me feed him and watch over him! If anything happens, I will kill him. I will not allow him to harm anyone in the Order!"

"Why are you doing this for him until this extent? Didn't you just meet him on the battlefield a few days ago?"

"As for the reason...... I cannot say."

Minerva's head drooped when she answered. Chris bit his lips without saying anything as well.

"But don't get things wrong. This person is just my tool . I'm keeping him by my side because there is something that cannot be accomplished without him. That's all. There's no other reason."

Just at that moment, flustered footsteps rang outside the tent, and someone ran inside.

"Lady Fran, I-I heard that I will be the one to hold the flag later on. Is that true!"

Chris turned around, and saw that it was Paola, the female medic that he had met before. She was startled by the tense atmosphere in the tent, and her body leaning forward shrunk back.

"Ah...... S-Sorry......"

"It's fine, Paola. Come on in." Francesca waved at Paola , "The units of ten must depart first. You shall be the leader of the main force." While saying that, she removed the Silver Hen flag from a post, draping it on Paola's shoulders like a cape.

"M-Me?" Paola said in shock.

"If the beauties are staying to bring up the rear, how will the men in the team think of running away? Hurry up and go." Francesca said.

"Lady Fran, you're not guiding the units?" Gilberto asked after hearing that.

"I shall bring up the rear. If the general flees first when the squad is retreating, both the enemy and our people would make a joke out of it."

Her words caused Chris's eyes to widen. His eyes flitted between Francesca and Gilberto.

—The commander bringing up the rear?

Chris had never heard of such a thing. What surprised him more was the fact that Gilberto and Minerva sighed deeply and nodded, as though they weren't planning to raise objections at all.

"E-Excuse me......" Paola, who had just received the team flag, turned around and asked: "Speaking of which, there's another member in the guard, right? T-Then, why don't we celebrate Chris's arrival after this?"

"Hurry up and go. I shall give my all to guard Lady Fran's life, and I will send her back to the camp safely even if I have to sacrifice my own life." To that, Gilberto merely answered coldly.

"N-No. I mean, everyone must safely—"

Before finishing her words, the soldiers outside were already calling Paola's name. She looked at the other people in the military tent with her large watery eyes, and immediately turned around to walk out of the tent.

"Almost everyone in the main force retreated!"

Nicolo shouted in the strong night gust. Chris thought back on the camp stationed with troops some time before while looking at the tents abandoned by the troops in the deserted camp illuminated by the campfire.

"Sigh, my blankets and sheets were really expensive..... . I will have to buy new ones now, how troublesome......"

Nicolo sighed, but his tone did not sound all that sorry .

—So the troops are retreating directly, abandoning the camp equipment?

Even so, under pursuit by cavalry, they would still be caught up with sooner or later. Chris pondered if it would be more feasible to face the attack with a formation before the camp, turning around to look at Francesca's calm face at the same time.

"We are now a unit running away from battle in loss. I don't want my cute soldiers to make unnecessary sacrifices for a meaningless battle."

As though she saw through Chris's thoughts, Francesca explained with a smile.

At that moment, only troops of about a hundred, including Chris and the members of the personal guard, were left at the camp, while sounds of hoof beats could already be heard from afar. It seemed like the cavalry was getting near.

"Raise the fires— Quick!"

Under Francesca's orders, the soldiers scattered towards various spots in the camp.

—Raise the fires? Ah, I see! Doing so can indeed hide the fact that the main force has already retreated......

—If so, is she planning to raise a few more campfires, making the enemy think that our troops are still stationed here ?

That moment, firelight could already be seen beyond the horizons. As Gilberto had described, two units of cavalry had been dispatched to attack them.

—But isn't this just a trick to deceive children? If they find out that the whole camp has already retreated, and change target to the main force led by Paola won't the whole Order be finished?

"It's about time for us to hide as well— Sigh, I really don't feel like fighting...... Everyone, don't let the enemy get near me!"

While speaking, Nicolo hurriedly stuffed medical equipment into a bag of cloth.

—Why is the military doctor staying to bring up the rear..... . Nicolo seemed to have seen through Chris's look of surprise. He leisurely gave Chris the thumbs up and pointed at his chest while saying:

"Think about it, what if people get injured while I'm not here?"

His words caused Chris to be dumbstruck— *Even if people get injured on the battlefield, how would there be time for him to deal with it......*

"And Paola isn't right here as well. When Captain or Meena gets hurt, it's an opportunity of the lifetime for me to treat them!"

A perverted smile surfaced on the military doctor's face as he spoke. Chris was not only dumbstruck, the words caused his head to spin as well.

"If things get so serious that I get hurt, you would have long died."

While Francesca interrupted, her golden hair fluttered in amusement.

"Actually, I don't think you should stay at all, Francesca." Chris couldn't help but interject behind her.

"Didn't I ask you to call me Fran? Besides, what does it matter if I stay? Gil, Meena and you will protect me, isn't that right?"

"You can't just say—"

"Stop fooling around and check out the condition of the weapons."

Gilberto spoke up in annoyance while Chris was about to rebuke her. Chris could only look at the longswords and spears arranged on the ground obediently.

The sword that Chris used before had shape and forging of the highest standard, but it was already broken by Minerva. In comparison, the weapon given to him would be mediocre no matter which one he was given.

—Whatever, let's not think of meaningless things......

Chris picked up a longsword and slid his fingers from the side to the tip of the blade.

—Since Minerva is staying, I have no other choice but to do my best.

However, the doubt that Chris was harboring was whether the sword in his hands had the power to protect the others. However, he shook his head in the end, casting off the meaningless doubts.

—I am a beast, I have to devour the people approaching me, more ferociously than usual.

—I will bite them to death, and I only need to do that.

"You stay by Lady Fran's side. Don't do anything suspicious, or I will cut your head down immediately!"

Gilberto's warning rang behind Chris. He stood up after nodding and exchanged gazes with Minerva at a side. That moment, she was holding her large sword by Francesca's side. A shadow of sorrow flitted through her eyes for a brief moment. However, with a gust of wind, her red hair behind her covered her face, causing Chris to be unable to see her face anymore.

A soldier raised the long flagpole, erecting the flag of the duke on the ground.

—They aren’t thinking of facing the assault at a place like this, are they? Shouldn’t they at least keep some distance from the tents?

"If you're worried about an attack of arrows, that's not a problem at all— and they're here."

Francesca's reminder jolted Chris back to his senses in surprise, and he immediately turned around to look at the source of the imposing hoof beats.

That moment, they could already hear the roars of the enemy troops, but the majestic shouts were almost hidden by the deafening clatter of four thousand galloping horses. A heavy rain of arrows fell, slashing through the night skies. Minerva dashed forward, her red hair turning into madly dancing flames. The military tent in front was already trampled by the enemy troops. Among the neighing of the horses, a hundred-odd cavalrymen appeared before them at the same time.

"It's the flag of Zaccaria!"

"It's the duke's daughter! Capture her!"

"The Vixen who raised a flag in rebellion—"

"We'll drag you back to Santuario, the Holy Capital, for public display!"

Minerva's small silhouette shot into the crowd of cavalry verbally abusing her comrades. The campfire nearby reflected a strong ray of light on the large sword she was holding, and in an instant, the vicious sword raised a torrent of wind, whirling dust, bent spears, soldiers' blood and severed horseheads into the air.

"—Wha?!" "What's wrong with this person!" "We must go on— Surround her, hurry!"

The blade that was swung around continuously like a windmill created a space that allowed only a strand of hair to pass through while Minerva's white sleeves danced in the darkness. The sword in her hand spun continually like a windmill. Armor flew in the air along with soldiers' flesh, terrifying the soldiers' horses into bouts of fearful neighs. The forward troops of the enemy had already fallen apart due to Minerva's attack.

"Blast, let's just ignore her. The enemy troops haven't even assembled a formation. Their main forces had probably ran away long ago. Hurry up and assemble to vanquish these enemies!"

The commander donning a helmet with long feathers shouted while raising his sword to point at Francesca, who was in front of him. The order raised the morale of his troops. They charged at their enemy with deafening horse beats once again. Minerva was kicked away by the horses of the enemy force. Her delicate body spun in the air.

"Minerva!"

Just when Chris was about to dash outwards, a hand caught hold of his shoulders, forcibly dragging him back.

"Don't act rashly. She is our sole vanguard."

It was Gilberto. His voice made Chris extremely uncomfortable, like a thorn was stabbing him.

"How can you say such a thing!"

"Defend the position that you are stationed at. She can deal with it even when she is alone!"

Gilberto was absolutely right. After Minerva was kicked into the air, she regained balance after a somersault. She even lowered her position when she reached the ground as well, effortlessly evading the spears stabbing her directly in front and from the side. After that, she raised the huge sword in her hands, and immediately cut a soldier into half along with his horse from below.

Chris gazed at Minerva. Even though he saw that the white skin on her face and shoulders was stained with her and the enemies' blood, he could only suppress the urge in his heart and squatted down in a stance with his sword raised— the tent at the side had already been lifted. A second and third wave of troops was charging towards them with torches held high.

"Vixen of Zaccaria, your useless subordinates already escaped. Look at how dumb they are, scattering everywhere holding torches. I'd say that you don't have any face to save anymore, so hurry up and yield!"

Chris blocked the spear lashed out by the first cavalryman who charged at him, stabbing his sword into his opponent's abdomen along the way. The sense of his sword swirling in flesh and blood came from his hand. With a wail, his assailant fell from his horse, his armor making clanking noises when they banged onto the ground. He had only just finished dealing with the attack when the next spear stabbed at him yet again. Chris waved his arm, barely blocking his opponent's attack with his wrist guard, and immediately took the chance to check out his comrades' battles.

The style of Gilberto's attacks was completely different from that of Minerva's, but there was an imposing presence that would make people shiver as well. He was teamed up on by quite a few cavalrymen, but his feet never shifted from their original position. The longsword in his hands slashed like flowing water, using momentum to block his adversaries' spears, then cut off each of the horses' front legs one slash after another. Francesca stood behind him, imperiously gazing upon the starry skies with her head raised.

—Wait...... Her eyes are closed?

—What is she doing? Enemies are already at her side—

—Does she believe in Gilberto's capabilities to this extent?

The enemy forces were all focused on Francesca alone. As she was to be caught alive, they did not use arrows. Apart from that, their assault pathways were limited at the camp where tents were erected everywhere. Was that a strategy to counter their attack? Chris was puzzled.

Disregarding that fact, what was she planning to do next ?

—Most of their men had left. But we really can't hang on any longer......

Chris gritted his teeth and decided not to think of the problems any more. The most important thing was that they were already drowning in a sea of enemy cavalry, and the missing Minerva. He must do his all to kill another person, killing more enemies to protect Minerva from harm, making this place into a sea of blood that could only tolerate corpses.

A blow at the edge of his sight from an enemy cavalryman scraped away Chris's shoulder armor. The impact caused him to kneel down on the ground. At the same time, his adversary immediately landed a kick on him as well. Chris spat out a mouthful of blood, and swung his sword to kill the enemy soldier with his body arched. His attack made the enemy cavalryman fall down with copious amounts of blood gushing out below his helmet. Then, as though he wanted to suppress Chris's presence, yet another cavalryman rushed forward to crash suddenly into Chris, directly charging at Francesca right after that. Francesca stood there proudly without moving, eyes closed and head facing the starry sky. Gilberto turned around as he realized the soldier's intent, piercing through the warhorse's throat with his sword, but was unable to stop the soldier from abandoning his spear for a sword, pouncing at Francesca from his horse— *This is bad, we won't be able to make it......*

All of a sudden, the sound of a sharp object slashing through the air whistled. The soldier's body flew in the air, turning in a back somersault and landed before Chris . There were two sharp daggers buried in his face.

Right after that, the same killing aura flashed past Chris's head a few more times as he continued to kneel down on the ground. Then, he saw daggers buried in the eye sockets of a few heavily armored cavalry men as they fell one after another. Chris turned around in a tremor.

"Ack, idiot, don't look over here, I'll be noticed by the enemy!"

—Nicolo?

Chris saw a belt full of daggers tied to Nicolo's chest as he concealed himself at a shady spot at the edge of the tents, and he threw viciously like a whip once again.

Now, he finally understood the reason Nicolo stayed to bring up the rear with Francesca's personal guards. Each time his whip-like arms lashed out, another enemy soldier fell in piteous wails.

—Isn't such accuracy a bit too scary? So he really isn't just any doctor......

"Stop spacing out!"

Gilberto shouted at Chris. Chris finally came to his senses with a jolt, and raised his longsword high to meet the next attack from a halberd, turning in a circle to reach his opponent's side right after that. His gaze met that of the soldier's shortly. Seeing his profound eyes distorting in terror, he pierced through the enemy with his longsword, feeling through his blade the sense of metal piercing through armor, stabbing into flesh and blood.

Chris took a step backwards after pulling out his longsword, his elbow actually coming into contact with another unfamiliar arm that was hard as steel. He turned around abruptly and saw that Gilbert seemed to have long predicted his movements, and already retreated to

Francesca's side. The eyes bright like marbles did not look clouded even when it was stained in the enemy's blood and dust from the ground.

"E-Everyone, scatter! Bring down the tents and let the unit surround them in a circle— Archers, stand out, quick!"

The enemy commander raised his voice to shout at the soldiers under his command in panic. After that, the smell of rust faded like ebbing tide. What was left on the battlefield was hills of corpses of horses and soldiers. Among them, a sole white flame that burnt, pressing close to the ground, was over there......

"—Minerva!"

At Chris's shout, the girl whose red hair was dyed in blood turned around and gave him an absent-minded smile— *So beautiful......* That thought surfaced in Chris's mind on instinct. The long hair behind Minerva that was like burning flames had a red stronger, more vibrant color than blood. Holding her huge sword, she stood on the hill of corpses without a hint of fear on her face. And such a radiant appearance—

No! This shouldn't be so...... A trace of sorrow surfaced on Chris's chest and gradually spread— *This shouldn't be so, no...... If her fate is to stand in this rain of pain, attracting people's gaze with her radiance, then......*

—I will devour this fate!

"The second wave of enemy troops has arrived."

Gilberto said in a low voice. At the same time, Minerva shifted her attention to the foes before her. Chris listened to the sounds that ran in the night— Clatter of hooves resounding in front, and sounds of a commotion approaching. It was the hoof beats of another troop of horses. It seemed like the pursuit unit left behind by the rear unit of the enemy troops had finally arrived.

Chris turned around to look at Francesca. Even with Gilberto's protection, the enemies' blades and blood still flashed past her skin on occasions, but she was still standing there without moving, with her eyes closed and head raised......

—She's listening?

Just when Chris realized the true meaning behind her appearance, the gold-haired girl radiating elegance had already opened her eyes.

"Start the fires!"

Under Francesca's orders, every single military tent that occupied their horizons in the camp suddenly burst into roaring flames. The blazing fire that almost burnt down the whole wilderness lit up the originally pitch-black night. Its tremendous presence caused Chris to take two steps back, bumping into Francesca as a result.

"Everyone, retreat!"

The young commander gave another sonorous order. At the same time, Minerva and Chris turned around instantly, preparing to flee the battlefield. Chris was slightly slower. After taking his first step, he hurriedly quickened his footsteps and gave chase. The soldiers holding torches at various locations in the camp assembled into an orderly unit after escaping from the burning tents and retreated from the battlefield. On the other hand, Nicolo joined their procession from a shady location at the edge of the tents as well, with his luggage on his back. In the process of retreating, wails and roars of anger as well as panicked whinnies of warhorses in the fire continually resounded in their ears.

So the reason Francesca ordered the soldiers to prepare a fire was for this moment...... Oil could be smelt from the remaining ashes that floated over from the burning tents. At the same time, Chris understood that Francesca stayed to use the flag of the Dukedom and she herself as bait, tempting the enemy forces into the fire that she designed. As long as the remaining people thought of a way to block the path of the enemy vanguards, they would be trapped when fires were set when their reinforcement arrives.

"—Captain, hurry up!"

Shouts of the soldiers rang in front of them. At the end of the camp, a few tents were lined up in an orderly manner. When the flaps were opened, quite a few horses could be seen inside.

" Don't let them escape! It's just a tactic of flames of such a degree, just to disperse our focus!"

The angry roars of the enemy made Chris turn around as he ran at the end of the processing. He saw posts of a few tents collapsing due to the tongues of flames licking at them, burying quite a few enemy soldiers. The purple flag was whirled into the sea of flames as the fire spread. However, under the orders of the enemy commander, quite a few arrows still shot out from a few military tents burning by Chris's side. It was the enemy forces. In the confusion, they managed to gather two lines of cavalry to pursue them.

" They're catching up!" Chris shouted.

"Just ignore them and run!" Gilberto couldn't help but say.

Wooden posts crackled in the sea of flames and fell. Hoof beats gradually approached from behind. However , the extent of wounds on Minerva and Gilberto prevented them from escaping at their maximum speed.

"We won't make it, huh......" Gilberto clicked his tongue while his expression twisted.

—No, they'll catch up at this rate!

......If so— Why did I stay in the first place!

Chris turned around as he came to a decision.

—My sword, the sword of the Beast, is one that will not be used for the protection of other people. If so......

—Let the beast inside of me swallow everything, and survive for slaughter!

He raised his sword hilt to the side of his mouth and held it with his teeth so that his hands could move freely.

"What are you doing!"

Minerva noticed his abnormal actions and turned around to call him. So that he would not stumble over her voice, Chris quickly ran in the direction of the enemy soldiers. He saw the mercenary in front of him glare at him.

"Are you crazy, kid? Die—!"

His adversary waved his lance, swinging it at Chris while slashing through the dust on the ground. Chris focused his attention completely on the opponent's hilt. Horses approached rapidly while raising dust. The instant before he was kicked by hooves, Chris's feet viciously stomped on the floor, dashing forwards all at once.

"—Wha?!"

The expression on the enemy soldier's face twisted in surprise, and he raised his spear to fend Chris off. However, Chris leapt when his feet stepped on the tip of his opponent's spear, stretching his hand out to frantically grab the rope tied to the horse's head, kicking the soldier off the horse right after that.

"Y-You—"

Chris took the horse, but saw another cavalryman passing by his fallen comrade, rushing towards Chris while swinging his spear. Chris held firm on the saddle and lowered his body to evade the spear from behind. His horse was startled by Chris's action, and was about to turn tail and run when Chris halted it with a single hand, taking back the longsword in his mouth with his other hand at the same time.

"Actually using a dirty trick like this—"

The horse Chris was riding on was quickly caught up. As he did not do his best to stabilize his sitting position after leaping onto the horse, focusing his attention on warding off the opponent's attacks, his riding speed dropped continually.

"You actually look down on us so much, I'm definitely making you regret this—"

In the foes' roars, Chris pulled on the rope, causing his horse to collide with that of the chasing soldier's. The two horses neighed in pain at the same time, maniacally twisting their bodies to rush towards the burning tents. Chris used the opportunity to swing the longsword in his hand and landed a blow on his enemy's hand holding the spear, using the momentum of the force to correct the path of his horse. However, his adversary did not have any chance to do so, and thus rammed directly into a burning tent. Right after that, Chris heard hoofbeats of quite a few horses and panicked breathing behind him, and guessed that there would be blades flying at him yet again. He rode his horse between the burning tents, his actions almost all done on instinct. After he severed the umpteenth head of the enemies, the longsword of poor workmanship finally snapped. A startling sense of foreignness spread from the sword to his hand.

"Damned kid, actually giving us so much trouble! It's time for you to die, so DIEEEEEE—"

Accompanied with curses, the sword in his enemy's hand had already swung towards him, while Chris— he raised his right hand, catching the sword with one hand. The action caused his enemy to sink into shock, the expression on his face abruptly clouded over with fear, as Chris quickly snatched over the sword in his hands.

Although Chris raised his hand high so that the speed of his foe's sword could not reach its maximum, the swing was already enough to cut the leather armor on his palm, causing his palm to be cut open. However, under such excitement, Chris was unable to feel any pain. He applied force with the hand holding the blade, directly knocking his adversary off the saddle. After that, he quickly turned around to knock the horse catching up behind him on its head, causing the enemy cavalryman to fall with his horse.

—I am a beast!

—My body and the pain on my body belongs to the beast!

—I must struggle frantically, sucking people's blood dry, then finding a place for me to die.

"—Chris!"

Just when his consciousness was gradually fading into the bloodstained surroundings, a voice pulled him back to reality. Flames of red and white appeared in his eyes......

"Do you want to die? Hurry up and get down from the horse!"

—Minerva? Why......? A red-haired girl came into Chris's gaze that was blurred due to blood— *She rode back to find me? Then have we escaped from the camp?* But there were still soldiers in pursuit, and sounds of tents collapsing, roars of the enemy troops, clanking of armor and horses raising dust by stomping frantically on the ground could still be heard behind them. *If this goes on, we'll still be caught up—*

"Just ignore that! Hurry up and get down!"

—Why? Why is Minerva telling me to get down the horse? Chris did not understand, and did not have the energy to

care anymore. He planned to continue killing, slaughtering the enemies without exception. However, before he turned around, he saw Minerva standing up on her saddle—

She jumped over from her saddle, embracing Chris with her slender arms. Her red hair fluttered in the air, drifting past Chris's face. At the same time, an unexpected strength pressed on him, bringing him away from the saddle, floating lightly under the pitch-black night.

Chris and Minerva fell onto the ground together, and rolled on the grassy land while holding each other tightly before stopping. When Chris supported his bloody right hand on the ground and was about to clamber up......

"Release the arrows—"

A loud order resounded through the area. It was not Francesca's voice. The voice was more tender, and it sounded like its owner was younger than Francesca...... It was Paola. Just when Chris made out the owner of the voice, he saw a silver flag waving under the pitch-black skies. At the same time, bolts descended from the sky like heavy rain, frantically pelting on the soldiers in pursuit of him.

They had indeed left the camp. The camp with military tents burning in a cluster was currently at the lower end of the sloping land of the hill.

The ones who launched an ambush counterattack on the enemy soldiers was the archer unit of the Order of the Silver Egg, in an orderly formation. Even the cavalry unit charged forward.

They turned back to support the squad bringing up the rear, under Paola's command.

—If so, were the torches held by the members of the Order that the enemy saw when they attacked the camp a smokescreen by Francesca as well?

Chris thought, such a strategy could not be described just by the word 'daring'. Francesca handed the commanding power of the main force to her subordinate, standing on the front lines as bait. Such a thing would be absolutely impossible without guards who can be trusted , and everyone had to complete their own tasks completely as well.

Apart from Minerva, Gilberto's swordsmanship was gained through rigorous training as well, so the feats that he accomplished were all backed up by true skill. As for Paola, she definitely had her own merits as well. After all , she and Francesca did not have any time for discussion of strategy before the battle at all. However, she accurately perceived the meaning of Francesca's arrangement, commanding the cavalry to run away with torches, all for the sake of a chance for a counterattack.

Chris lied blankly on the cold grassy land, staring at the soldiers of the Celestial army who were forced by the troops holding silver flags to scatter and escape into the camp with blazing tents in loss. Chris was in a daze, and completely forgot about the pain of his bleeding wounds, and didn't even notice the warmth of the body squashed under him.

"......Hey!"

Only when a fist pressed onto his abdomen did he come back to his senses.

"How long are you trying to squash my body for!"

Minerva was squashed under Chris's body with her back on the grassy land. She flailed her arms, trying to crawl out from under his body.

"Ah, s-sorry......"

Chris tried to rise, but his head suddenly spun, causing him to collapse onto Minerva before he was able to do anything else.

"W-What are you doing, idiot!"

—Blood...... There's so much......

—This is bad...... So cold......

"And also, didn't you go a bit overboard by stealing an enemy's horse all by yourself? What if you couldn't get the pursuing soldiers off your tail? You're my tool! You can't just die when you want, idiot!"

Minerva tried her best to carry Chris while her brows furrowed. Although her injuries weren't as serious as those of Chris's, she was hurt all over as well. With her clothes charred in many places and bloodstains all over them, they were already in rags.

"Hey, Nicolo, somebody call Nicolo over! Chris, you can't sleep, my body is not your mattress!"

That moment, Minerva's curses were like tender caresses to Chris's ears. He leant closely to the warmth pressing on his body, trying not to lose consciousness.

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"Chris, you can't sleep! I forbid you to die easily by yourself like this! It's just a little injury! You can't sleep, idiot! Wake up already!"

While Nicolo treated Chris's injuries, Minerva was still doggedly calling him by his side. With a helpless look, Nicolo was forced to assign tasks of boiling water and changing towels to her, trying to make her speak less. However, as soon as Minerva's tasks were completed, she would immediately run to Chris's side, pinching his cheeks to wake him up.

When Nicolo finished treating the hurt, unexpectedly, Francesca asked them to move through the night.

"The tents were all burnt down. We need to walk for at least two days and two nights before we can sleep at the village closest to this place. Hurry up and move if you know that it's troublesome as well." She said.

It was actually a wise decision. After all, it was not impossible for the Celestial army to continue assigning pursuit units to chase them. Besides, since the tents burnt down, the men did not have the time and mood to console themselves by drinking in the wilderness while waiting for their wounds to heal anymore.

Chris slept on the horse cart containing weapons and armor. Seeing him turn when the horse cart moved, Minerva cried out and asked Nicolo: "H-Hey, I-Is it really okay for that guy to lie down in the horse cart?"

"Sigh, probably?" Hearing her question, Nicolo answered in a sleepy, lazy tone: "He's a monster. His arrow wounds from yesterday are almost completely healed. What does that guy usually eat for him to have a body that recovers so quickly......"

By eating people's lives— Chris still couldn't say those words. However, Nicolo's words raised a question in Chris's heart......

—My injuries heal very quickly? Is that so? Is it possible that it's because my body is really the body of the Beast?

The thought caused him to shudder. In fact, he never had the military doctor of his squad tend to his injuries in the past. So, there was not any information for him to judge if his wound recovery was quick or slow. However , that moment......

—So I really **am** *a beast living on by swallowing lives.*

When he thought of that, Chris felt like tearing open the freshly-stitched wounds open with his fingernails...... When he woke up from his nightmare, he saw Minerva on the same horse cart as he was as soon as he opened his eyes. Her gaze was on him, and she turned away right after that.

He tried to lift his head slightly and shift his gaze outside the horse cart, and saw Gilberto riding on a horse while Francesca was by his side, her golden hair reflecting the morning rays exceptionally dazzlingly.

—Was the situation the same as well?

—This time, did I survive because of the Beast's blood as well?

Chris could not reach a conclusion. He closed his eyes once again.

After midnight of the next day, the members of the Order finally arrived at a large village. It was already Zaccarian territory. Because of that, the villagers eventually came out to welcome Francesca when they saw her. But speaking of which, the total number of soldiers was over a thousand, and with the horses as well , if they really had to stay for a few days, finishing up the horse feed and well water was something that would happen sooner or later.

"I wish to borrow your storerooms for us to have a night's rest here. Can you please give us some food and water? I shall send someone over with the payment after this."

"What payment? How can we take that! Our village doesn't have anything but if you want beer, we *can* provide some for you instead."

The village chief's answer gave the soldiers much excitement. Even though Francesca reminded them that they shouldn't drink too much as they had to set off from the village in the morning, not one of them listened.

They drank by campfires. Chris sat on a patch of grass at a side as well, looking at them laughing while he leant on the pile of luggage at a shady spot.

He felt a sense of alienation from the surroundings, from the scene, from the wounds, the bright illumination from the campfire surrounded by people, and the people laughing around there......

—Is it really fine for me to stay here?

—Should I allow myself to continue living?

—The battle ended, but I'm in a situation where everyone is smiling at each other in a circle. Is that really okay?

"Hey, newbie!" "Don't fall asleep! You won't be able to wake up if you do!" "Wahahaha! Look at him! Is that Meena's doing?"

All of a sudden, the topic of discussion focused on him while he was hugging his knees by the pile of luggage, making him raise his head. That moment, a crowd of unfamiliar soldiers— no, Chris had already seen these people. He just never asked for them, and never spoke to them before. They headed towards Chris, each looking quite drunk.

"I-Is there anything wrong?" Chris asked the people.

"Isn't it cold for you to sit here? That's bad for the wounds." "See how we make your body warm from inside to the outside!"

"Ah, um, wait a minute......"

Disregarding Chris's intentions, the people forcibly pulled him to the campfire, stuffing a cup the size of an urn into his hands. Chris took the cup before he was able to refuse them, and all of the surrounding people came to pour beer for him. The others surrounding the campfire gradually sat by Chris's side as well.

—What the heck? Why are these people suddenly......

"......Um, about the beer......"

Chris was unable to swallow wine stronger than grape wine.

"How old are you?"

One of them asked. When Chris answered that he was seventeen, "Then just drink while pinching your nose!" An illogical answer tossed the question back again. Then, the people started clamoring, even poking him with their elbows to urge him to drink. Chris did not have any choice but to take a sip, and frantically coughed after that with his face flushed, making the surrounding soldiers fall onto the ground laughing.

"......Sorry for yesterday."

One of them abruptly said. Chris stared blankly at him with his eyes widened.

"Saying that you're a harbinger of misfortune who would kill one of your own...... Haha, it seems like your legend did not affect our luck at all."

"Yeah, and this guy helped us protect the Captain's small butt from being violated by the enemy."

"Sorry." "Yeah, the Captain's chagrin is more important to us than the land of the Principality!" "Haha, that's true! "

—Why......

—Why are these people apologizing to me? Even though I'm ......

"Say, where did you learn that way of killing from?"

"All of us shuddered when we saw that. Good thing we didn't meet you three days ago." "Yeah. You would've been our enemy that time if so!"

"Hah, we have good luck, didn't I keep telling ya? Our Captain is a goddess who brings luck!"

Listening to the soldiers' hearty chuckles, he felt tortured, as though someone was prying open the wounds on him with a pick.

—Luck? There's no such thing......

—There will be one day when the beast in me will......

—Sooner or later I will have to swallow your fates to the bones......

—No, please don't talk to me anymore, please...... Don't laugh by my side......

"Can you please stop counting Captain in? It's enough with Paola alone. She's not some sort of goddess of luck, but a true goddess of fortune!"

"Yeah! A true goddess of fortune!"

"If so, doesn't that mean we have a true soul reaper as well? It's Meena!" "Ahahahaha!"

The laughs by the people surrounding the campfire whooshed by Chris's ears like cold wind.

"Say, the Meena yesterday wasn't like a soul reaper at all, but just an extremely normal pure maiden!"

"Yeah, seeing her face drained of blood, like she's asking what she should do if this kid died."

"It was the first time I saw her like that" "She looks cuter that way!" "Agreed!"

"Hey, I'll say, if it's this kid......" "Yep!" "There's a chance!"

As the surrounding people chatted, meaningful smiles suddenly surfaced as they exchanged perverted gazes. Then, "Kid, listen, you're the only man in the Captain's squad of personal guards." The soldier with light brown eyes sitting by Chris's side said to Chris with his mouth curling.

"......The first? But......"

—What about Gilberto? Isn't he the head of the Captain's personal guards?

"Even though our Chief's strong, he still isn't a man." " Yeah, no balls." "Captain asked him to sleep in the same room as her, and he actually refused!" "Yeah, it's an opportunity all of us dream of!" "Kid, you'll have to investigate this properly for us!" "Because we started bets on things like, is the hair under Meena red, and the like...
..." "Wahahahaha, but nobody had the skill to confirm that, so the money we bet is still hanging there!" "People who would dare to do that would lose their lives, after all
!" "Most probably, the only person who can evade that sword is the Chief." "Yeah. Pity he doesn't have balls."

That moment, the people sitting opposite to Chris suddenly paled, springing up from the ground and the chairs, while the insensitive people sitting by Chris froze all of a sudden as well. A foreign presence that was totally alien to the atmosphere appeared behind Chris, making his head hurt so much that he wanted to look for a hole to hide in— he actually wasn't able to notice his appearance at all. However, from the shocked reaction of the surrounding people, he should have noticed it long ago.

Chris slowly turned around and saw a suit of pitch-black armor and a cold longsword. When he raised his gaze, he saw the pair of bright marble-like eyes.

"Ah,haha, ahahaha......"

A soldier in black laughed emptily.

"C, C-C-C-Chief— Ah, um...... W-We— We're talking about cannonballs of the catapult machine!"

"T, T-T-That's right, we're thinking where we should look for the supplies......" "Oi, you idiots, we don't *have* a catapult machine at all!"

The voices with slight quavers hissed to each other. When Gilberto took a step forward, the people tossed their cups away and hid at the other side of the campfire.

However, Gilberto didn't even look at them. He shifted his gaze to Chris, looking at him coldly. Under a subconscious impulse, Chris put down his cup and stood up from the ground.

"......Are your injuries okay?"

Gilberto's question made Chris's eyes widen in surprise. He never thought that Gilberto would be concerned of his injuries, and thus nodded somewhat unnaturally.

"Did you battle in that way from before?"

"......Huh?"

Gilberto suddenly grabbed Chris's right arm, causing cold sweat to seep abruptly from Chris's face.

"You always target the enemies' weapons or wrists. Is that your subconscious choice? Is it because you don't wish to kill?"

Chris swallowed after hearing that.

"If you keep doing dumb stuff like that, normal swords would break in no time."

Gilberto noticed it. In the few seconds when they were dealing with the enemy back to back......

"After this, don't think of rushing into the enemy's ranks like a mad dog. If you die, their attacks will reach Lady Fran very quickly, so it's best if you remember this. "

Chris averted his gaze, retracting his right hand at the same time, locking his hand on the arm of his left hand, applying force to squeeze his left arm with his fingertips.

—But I don't know other ways of fighting......

—How can a person like me be someone's guard? How can a person like me know how to fight to protect the other?

That moment, Gilberto placed his hand on the hilt of the longsword tied to his waist, making Chris take a step backwards.

However, Gilberto's action was not to unsheathe his sword, but to untie the longsword instead, handing it to Chris. His act shocked Chris. He gazed blankly at the longsword before his eyes and turned around to look at Gilberto again.

"I'm lending you this sword." Gilberto said.

"......Eh? Huh? What?"

"I think you can't change your way of fighting at a moment's notice. Material superior to the metal making up the sword probably can't be found even if you comb through the Seven Countries of the East. Take it. After all , members of the personal guards can't always look for weapons in battles. That will endanger Lady Fran's life. Don't you lose this sword. Return it to me when you find a better weapon that suits you more."

Chris took the sword that Gilberto was handing to him , his heart still in disbelief over what was happening before his eyes. The workmanship of the sword in his hands was startlingly good, and it was unbelievably light in the hands. It was definitely not something that one would lend people just like that.

—Why did he...... Chris raised his head to look at Gilberto with a look of disbelief once again. That moment , he suddenly tossed a question to him again.

"Name?"

"Huh?"

"I'm asking you for you name— I haven't heard it from you personally."

Before answering, a sound choked in his throat, moving his heart.

—When...... was the last time I told the others of my name?

—The name Mother gave me...... Minerva knew it before we even met......

—Even so, right now...... I want to answer him...... I want to tell Gilberto my name. Why is that?

"—Cristoforo......"

Hearing Chris's answer, his brows furrowed for a moment. He then turned around and said, "You can just call me Gil."

From the instant Chris took the sword from Gilberto, the surrounding people were looking with bated breath. That moment, all of them gulped at the same time, and some even made sounds of admiration. Chris could think of the reason. It was because, Francesca was probably the only person in the whole Order who could call him Gil.

"It's hard for one to call a person's full name on the battlefield."

Gilberto said coldly, and rose to leave. Chris held the longsword with his hands, staring blankly at his leaving silhouette.

—*What the heck is this guy thinking......* Chris did not understand. However, the longsword he was holding was unquestionably lent to him by Gilberto.

"You're...... seriously amazing......"

"Chief, he......" "Didn't he?" "It was the first time we've seen him like that......"

Chris gazed at the silhouette of the knight clad in black armor while listening to the surrounding soldiers' thoughts, then pressed the cold longsword to his chest.

That moment, the people's clamors reached his brain once again, various smells stimulating his senses as well. Fragrance of wine, the aromatic smell of grease from roasted meat, and the smell of grass from the farm, all of the smells mixed together in the night breeze, emanating through the whole village.

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As she said from the start, the place Francesca slept in was the storeroom in the village head's house.

"She really won't go back on her words......"

The village chief couldn't help but smile wryly when they talked about Francesca's stubborn personality as he led the way for Chris at the outskirts of the farm. Francesca probably told the village chief that she couldn't sleep in someone's warm house since she already mentioned before her men that she was to sleep in someone's storeroom.

"This way, please. Then allow me to excuse myself."

The village chief stretched out his hand to point at a small house emitting a faint glow through the windows and the door seams, bowed at Chris and turned around to leave after handing the oil lamp he was holding to Chris.

The storeroom was spread full of white cloth. There were so much that it would make people wonder if they were collected after searching through the whole village. The flags of the Dukedom and the order were hung on the wall. Francesca lied elegantly on soft wool, enjoyably sipping her apple wine. Minerva squatted by Francesca's side while doing something under Paola's instructions. When she saw Chris entering, she suddenly hid her hand behind her. It seemed like she was holding something.

"D-Don't just barge in all of a sudden!"

She called out while randomly grabbing something to throw at Chris.

"S-Sorry!"

Chris hurriedly shut the door and left, almost smashed by the object thrown by Minerva that hit the door instead of him. It fell before the seam of the door. It was actually a stone pestle used to grind herbs.

"What does it matter. Enter. It is cold tonight. You can warm my feet in place of beast fur."

"Fran, don't act recklessly!"

"Hmm...... Speaking of which...... This medicine was ground for Chris, so why don't you put it on for him, Meena?"

"Paola, don't be such a busybody!"

Chris listened to the three girls talking in varying degrees of loudness and couldn't help but sigh. He removed the sword on his waist and hung it on the wall outside the storeroom, sitting down by the windows.

"Chris, didn't I ask you to enter?"

The window opened, and Francesca poked her head out of the window. Paola approached the windowsill as well.

"I, um...... I'm here as security. Gilberto handed me the job......"

"You sleep at other storerooms, it's enough for me to guard her!" Hearing that, Minerva came closer to speak to Chris as well: "You're hurt! Who told you to be a guard— This is your medicine, here— Hurry up and scram after taking your medicine and look for a place to sleep!"

Minerva pressed the outstretched herbal medicine by Chris's ear. Warmth lingered on the freshly-ground herbs from its grinding, and it had a strong smell of grass as well. However, Minerva's rough actions almost stuffed the herbs into Chris's ears.

"Um...... Herbs aren't used like that......" Paola timidly said at a side.

"Huh? That sword?"

Francesca was the one to notice it first. From the side, Minerva's eyes widened as she saw it as well.

"Isn't that Gilberto's sword? Why is it on you?" Minerva asked.

"......He lent it to me."

Although Chris did not think they would believe it, he still explained the things that occurred thoroughly. Hearing that, Minerva heaved a sigh and shrugged, while Francesca said while smiling after repeating the same actions for a few times: "That guy really isn't truthful enough......"

"Speaking of which, where's Gilberto? Where did he run off to? Didn't I say that the five of us have to celebrate?"

"Hmm, I seem to recall that he said that he's going back to the Zaccaria Castle to report the results of the battle." Minerva said.

"Didn't I tell him to go there tomorrow...... Whatever, then let the four of us have a pajama party to celebrate ourselves!"

Minerva furrowed her brows when she heard that and pulled Francesca and Paola into the storeroom. She closed the window forcefully, almost hitting Chris's nose.

"......But I deliberately arranged a place by your side to sleep at." Francesca said.

"Shush, hurry up and sleep!"

After the conversation got cut off abruptly, Chris leant against the wall while hugging the longsword Gilberto lent to him. However, the window was suddenly opened once again. It was Minerva. She stretched out her arm and threw out quite a few white cloths that covered his head.

"......Ah...... Thank you."

After thanking her, the window was closed once again without any response from her.

Chris used the cloths to cover his body with the areas above his neck exposed, raising his head to look at the unblemished night sky. Not far away from the fence, there were still people fooling around the campfire. There were songs that went off-pitch due to drunkenness as well.

Chris thought that all of that was just surreal. Even though it was the night-time that he was the most afraid of, even though a battle had finished, he couldn't remember the faces of the enemies he met the previous night, the feeling of piercing through enemies' flesh and blood with his sword, the pain of his flesh cut open by the halberd, and the condition of the enemy soldier who died with blood seeping out from his neck at all. He closed his eyes, seeing the happy faces of the people who survived. It was the first time in his life that he experienced such a night.

Chris woke up suddenly from his bleary sleep due to an abnormal movement around him. He stretched out his hands to search for the longsword covered below the white cloths by his hand. That moment, the campfire was already extinguished, while the sounds of frolicking around the campfire had gone silent. All was silent under the night sky. The only thing that was still awake was the dark grassy land and the estate surrounding the house. The coldness almost made people yawn. Such an atmosphere was probably just a scene before daybreak. There weren't any sounds around at all, and neither were there moving people and animals. However......

—*What was that small noise just now?* Chris noticed it. The abnormal presence came from behind him— from the storeroom behind him.

—Someone is crying?

Just when he was stretching his hand out to open the window, the voice that passed through the wall made Chris convulse without prior warning.

"Don't move, don't you move......"

It was Minerva's voice. She noticed Chris's movements . Chris saw the scene through the window in the instant she cried out. That moment, Minerva had her back against the wall of the storeroom, and was sitting down on the floor while hugging her knees.

Chris breathed out, and turned around to sit down while leaning against the exterior wall of the storeroom once again.

"I'm fine, you just stay outside...... I'm just feeling a bit of pain, it's okay......" Minerva said to Chris through the wall of the storeroom.

—Did she...... see a scene from the future once again?

—That's right, I remember her saying that she hates sleeping......

—Seeing the future......

—Because she can feel the pain of death from the death omens she sees......

"Just stay outside the door." Minerva said.

Her words made Chris clench his ten fingers on his kneecap.

—What kind of pain is this......?

—When did Minerva start shouldering such torture......?

Minerva stretched her hand out from the window. Her white arms were trembling continually. Chris caught hold of Minerva's hand in his confusion. The two palms overlapped tightly. At first, Chris could still clearly feel Minerva's five slender fingers trembling continually, but when her palm started to get warm in Chris's hand, the trembling gradually calmed down and stopped.

A long silence enveloped the area surrounding his and her palms, the fading time almost making people feel that it was about to get light. After some time of consolation, Minerva finally stopped her choking, but the surroundings were still bathed in the pitch-darkness of the night sky. She suddenly pushed Chris's hand aside again. Chris felt her pressing her hand back to her chest, hugging her knees.

"W-Who asked you to care for me......?" For some reason, Minerva suddenly snapped at Chris: "Forget what happened just now— Ngh...... Whatever, it's nothing!"

"That's not the case at all......"

Minerva was about to close the window when Chris realized it and hurriedly stopped the closing window. From the seam, he saw a pair of slender ears and neck through the red hair on Minerva's back.

"W-What are you doing, I don't need you to care. Even though you said that you're going to guard the door, you still dozed off in the end, useless fellow!"

"......Sorry. But...... But I just wanted to look at your face and hear your voice. That's all, so just relax......"

Because Minerva was the only person who did not die even though her fate was swallowed by the beast. If she were to go missing one day, Chris would have to avoid all contact with other people, walking alone in the night once again.

However, Minerva did not seem to understand. With a turn, she grabbed Chris's wrist, clenching furiously onto him, "Idiot! Only you were able to sleep well, I-I—"

"What sort of future did you see?" Chris asked.

"You don't need to know!"

"Tell me, because I am staying by your side just to eat up the signs of death that you foresee."

"Shut up!"

"Why!?"

Chris grabbed the longsword by his side and squeezed his upper torso through the window. Minerva raised her head, her moist eyes meeting that of Chris's. That instant, their voices were completely hidden in the profound night.

Chris opened his mouth, but was unable to speak, and could only huff out breath that lost all temperature. On the other hand, Minerva's gaze wandered, and refocused on Chris in determination after some effort. She said: "It's you!" While biting her lips so hard that it almost bled, Minerva thought of how to speak of her next words as she trembled.

"You used that sword to kill me, I saw my face reflected on the blade of the sword!"

Her words made Chris grip the hilt of the sword in his hands reflexively, and he was unable to realize the significance of Minerva's words that moment.

"I saw it...... I saw you using that sword— Gilberto's sword to pierce through my brows!"

Chapter 7 – Santuario

Rhythmic footsteps unique to those with a graceful demeanor echoed in a long corridor in the royal palace.

The high ceiling was made of rocks, while tapestries depicting magnificent illustrations were hung on the walls, forming an interlacing arrangement with the carved dragon torches that were hanging on the walls as well. The owners of the footfalls were two men wearing court clothing and a black-haired man in front of them with a purple cape on his shoulders, looking somewhat younger than the two men behind him. His expression gave off a sense of domineering arrogance.

The trio stopped at a large door at the left side of the corridor.

“Archduke Cornelius, good afternoon!”

The two sentinels standing before the door retracted their spears blocking the door and saluted the black-haired man together. The man addressed as Archduke Cornelius nodded and turned around to speak to his attendants: “Wait here.” After that, he walked into the room supported by cold rock pillars.

In the room, two men wearing purple capes similar to that of Cornelius' were already sitting before a large table with a map spread over it. The two of them had the same status as Cornelius: they were all Consort Prospects. One of them was Galelius Neros, a bald, middle-aged man over the age of fifty with a hooked nose. The other had a tall figure reminiscent of a stone sculpture, and was chosen to succeed the position of Consort Prospect five years earlier than Cornelius, Lucius Gregorius. In other words, the trio gathered there were the three Patriarchs of the Three Great Duchies of the Celestial Kingdom.

The Three Great Duchies branched from the Celestials during the early days of the Celestial Kingdom's founding. As time passed, the blood ties between the three duchies had already weakened. However, the three of them had the same resolute personality while their eyes that were as cold as steel marbles gave off a presence so similar that people unfamiliar with the details might mistake them as members of the same family. As he was aware of the fact, Cornelius hated the meetings with the three of them gathered there.

(The blood was too strong, I suppose…)

With extreme displeasure, Cornelius straightened his back and walked towards the table with all eyes on him.

“For the Golden Cart of the heavens.”

Speaking the Holy Edict, Galelius stretched his hand out to draw a triangle before him.

“For the deep cart trails of the heavens.”

Lucius continued the Holy Edict, drawing a triangle before him as well.

“…… For the eternal Nail of the heavens.”

Cornelius continued the unfinished edict, shifting his gaze towards the table after that. Large amounts of cobblestones painted in different colors were placed upon the large map on the table, signifying the troops stationed at various locations.

“This expedition is of the utmost importance.” Galelius said in a low voice: “With this, the remaining eyesores in the Bishop territory will be unable to raise an army to cause trouble anymore.”

“I heard that the Principality’s reinforcement army is just a sham as well.” Lucius added quietly.

That moment, Cornelius swept away the cobblestones in front of him and said: “What a meaningless battle. Even if Galelius fits a trip into his schedule of herbal baths, he probably won’t be able to pacify this chaos without two months’ effort.”

Galelius snorted in amusement.

They said Bishops were elders of the Church who were in charge of managing the Palkai religion that spread throughout the Celestial Kingdom before it was founded. During the early days of the Kingdom’s founding, as the Celestial Kingdom was worried that uprooting the power of the Church would cause civil unrest, they chased the clergymen out of the Sibyl Queen’s land and silently allowed the existence of these churches; but thus sowed seeds of disaster, causing the Seven Countries of the East to rebel against the Celestial Kingdom after two hundred years in the name of the Church.

(Perhaps the Church really was powerful enough to gather the Seven Countries of the East to attack together, then a battle might be slightly meaningful…) Even though that was what

Cornelius thought in his heart, he did not let slip his opinions.

“If so, we now have enough reason to eradicate them all.”

Lucius grinned at a side. This sinister man once strongly requested Cornelius to let him carry out all executory work involving the Bishops, and was a filthy, despicable man one would rather avoid.

“Didn’t the Archbishop escape to Medoccea?” Lucius asked.

“It will be better to spare this person’s life, as it will be more beneficial to us.” Cornelius glared at Lucius as he spoke— the Archbishop was still the person leading the churches in the whole country; so if he were to be publicly executed, it would have a negative impact on the public support in the border areas of the Celestial Kingdom. It was the main obstacle to the Goddess Tuekay unifying the religion in the whole country.

“In any case, Cornelius’s expedition this time successfully recaptured land of the Archbishop before the Weneralia Celebration, so His Excellency is sure to be pleased.”

And of course, the ‘His Excellency’ mentioned by Galelius definitely wasn’t the Queen of the Celestial Kingdom, but the Emperor, the Queen’s father, and at the same time, Galelius’s elder brother.

(Actually, the Queen won’t be happy for a battle won, will she?)

With a snort of amusement, Cornelius said: “As a matter of fact, I was planning to completely vanquish the Union Army before the Weneralia Celebration.”

“Isn’t that rather forced?” Galelius shrugged while smiling.

The said Weneralia Celebration was the day a groom was chosen for the Queen of the Celestial Kingdom, and the day of their wedding as well. It was the most important celebration in the Celestial Kingdom.

“When will the Oracle of the Goddess Tuekay be?”

“Time flows slower in the heavens, so it will probably be around new moon.”

“If the Queen’s groom is chosen from the Patriarchs of the three Houses, you will have to adopt a son to succeed you.”

“If Her Majesty allows it, I shall have my nephew succeed the position of the Patriarch.”

Galelius and Lucius discussed the succession of the Patriach of their Houses.

In fact, even though it was not widely known to the common people, there weren’t any so-called struggles for power among the Three Great Duchies who were at the zenith of the nobles. After all, nobody could interfere in the process of choosing the Queen’s groom. Apart from that, the succession of the position of the Consort Prospect was always decided through oracles as well. For instance, after Cornelius’s father was expelled from the House due to overindulgence in women, Cornelius, as the fourth son of the second-eldest son, was chosen as a Consort Prospect when he was twenty four, and thus succeeded the position of his uncle as Patriarch of the House. In other words, even if the noblemen tried their hardest to gain power, whether they could keep it was an unknown factor.

Cornelius believed that this succession system of the noblemen and Patriarchs formed the basis of stability of the central power in the Celestial Kingdom.

(If it wasn't power obtained through support of the Gods, but rather, status gained through one's own struggles, its weight would be as light as a feather. And I was one who was chosen by the Gods. Well then, next……)

Cornelius believed that he would get the position of the Queen's groom, thus attaining the nation, and then he would eradicate everyone in his way.

"That's right, I forgot to mention something. I found out something during my expedition, about the troublesome daughter of the Duke of Zaccaria."

Cornelius suddenly raised his head and spoke to the other two Consort Prospects.

"Oh…… That something Order, is it correct?"

Galelius's eyes moved as he thought, and then he voiced out his thoughts regarding Cornelius's topic, while Cornelius nodded as well.

“It seems like she only sent her troops because of a request from the Bishops, and her troops escaped from a siege of my design.” Cornelius said.

“Oh? Looks like that Vixen is rather good at fighting retreating battles.” Galelius smiled while answering.

In truth, what Cornelius wished to convey included the ingenious stratagem of the Order’s commander, but more importantly, there was a swordsman in her unit……

“She is truly in that Order, isn’t she? There’s no mistake anymore.” Lucius leaned closer as well.

“A red-headed girl in her teens who can’t be harmed no matter how many arrows or spears were aimed, and clothed in white as well…… I thought that it was impossible, but it’s undeniable now.”

Cornelius thought back on the reports regarding the ‘ Soul Reaper who sprays salt on the battlefield’ from his subordinates after the battle and formed such a conclusion.

That moment, he suddenly recalled the Star Eater as well.

He had trapped the Beast in the vanguard unit that was doomed to annihilation just to confirm if the Brand on the Star Eater was authentic; and he did indeed survive. Because of that, Cornelius's suspicions were confirmed. However, he heard that the Beast joined the Order of the Silver Egg in the end. Fate was indeed wondrous.

(Although that fellow is rather bothersome, he should not be mentioned here.)

After shaking his head to banish his original thoughts, he silently awaited the other two to change the topic. Not a while later, Galelius closed his wrinkled eyes, "…… Say, I never thought that she would switch to Zaccaria. What do you think we should do? Bring her back?"

"Shouldn't we just kill her? If her presence is realized by the people, the standing of us nobles will be in danger ."

"Of course we have to bring her back. Her powers are much stronger."

Cornelius objected to Lucius's opinion, causing Lucius and Galelius to sink into silence at the same time.

They were probably having a headache over the matter. Ever since the rebellion of the Seven Countries, the reason the Celestial Kingdom faced so many disturbances was, as Cornelius said, due to the fact that the Queen's powers of clairvoyance were not strong enough.

That moment, Cornelius nonchalantly stretched his hand out to pick up one cobblestone after another, placing them on the area to the east of Santuario that was surrounded by hills, "I shall defeat Zaccaria. Please give me the military power to do so once again."

The meeting ended. Cornelius walked in the corridor and reached the depths of the palace. The area with beige pillars was unbelievably silent. However, when he headed towards deeper areas, the silence gradually disappeared, and when he reached a large door with a winged wheel carved on it, priests and shrine maidens hastily pushed the said door open and exited the room.

"Did someting happen?" Cornelius stopped one of the shrine maidens and asked.

“Lord Cornelius!”

The young-looking shrine maiden ran towards Cornelius in tears.

“The Queen— An ominous divine revelation descended upon Her Majesty, but we cannot tell anyone else—“

After hearing that, Cornelius pushed her away and walked into the Queen’s bedroom. The bedroom was extremely spacious, and with the sunlight falling through the glass ceiling, walking inside would give one the illusion of being in the courtyard. At the center of the room, there was an elevated space surrounded by four levels of stairs used as a bed stand, and a mattress covered by a translucent veil was placed on it.

“Is Lady Hieronihica not back yet?” “She is supervising the Harvest Festival……” “Hurry up and get her, quick!”

The flustered appearance of the priests in the bedroom really didn’t look like something that should appear in the royal palace, the holy ground of the Goddess Tuekay.

(I see, so Hieronihica is not here.)

Hieronihica, the administrator of the Inner Palace Division, in charge of managing the priests and shrine maidens in the palace, had left the palace to pray for a bountiful harvest. Because of that, the Inner Palace was lacking leadership. That was an extremely good opportunity to Cornelius.

(I have to do a bit more before this spreads to that person's ears.)

"Lord! Please wait!"

"Lord, you cannot enter now!"

Seeing Cornelius's actions, the surrounding priests gathered around him with startled wails. However, Cornelius continued to walk to the Queen's bed stand. He saw a diminutive silhouette rise behind the veil, quailing towards the end of the bed after that.

"Your Majesty, Cornelius is here to visit you. Please allow me to open the veil and see you."

Without awaiting the Queen's answer or heeding the surrounding priests' objections, Cornelius flipped open the veil covering the bed. On the mattress, there sat a girl who had just risen. Her slender arms were trembling frantically. With her red hair as vibrant as flames cascading onto her white, delicate shoulders, her eyes that were like black pearls teared up in fear and confusion.

“A- Ah……”

Her lips were trembling as well.

“Your Majesty, please order the others to vacate the room.”

Cornelius’s voice was as sharp as a dagger penetrating flesh. The girl in distress could not stop her lips from trembling, but still gave orders in accordance to Cornelius’s instruction in the end. After hearing that, the priests exchanged looks of unease, but seeing Cornelius frown at them, they obediently exited the Queen’s bedroom.

Cornelius turned around to gaze at the girl lying on the bed, kneeling down before the bed stand at the same time.

“Your Majesty…… Lady Silvia, are you alright?”

While he spoke, he glanced at the girl sitting at the end of the bed— Queen Silvia. Silvia clutched her white blanket, her trembling unable to be quenched, like she was in convulsions. The exposed shape of her slender feet and smooth skin looked very alluring.

(How exquisite……)

Cornelius narrowed his eyes to gaze at Queen Silvia's delicate, charming face and figure while making such a conclusion in his mind.

When Cornelius was chosen in an oracle as Consort Prospect, his perverted father once said to him— *If you are chosen once again next time, you will be able to own that enticing body, and then taint her with your own two hands……*

In truth, Cornelius inherited next to nothing of his father's perverted personality. However—

(When I think about it, this girl's beautiful appearance is a divine symbol of being blessed by the Gods.)

Cornelius indulged only in power and status. His obscene father was someone that he would never think of emulating in his whole life.

(But if things go well, I might have the chance to obtain another woman more beautiful than her.)

(Although both of them have similar beautiful appearances, the latter owns a strong body and a determined spirit incomparable to the former.)

Cornelius thought to himself that the person had stronger powers of foresight as well.

"…… I heard that divine revelation descended upon you, is that right?"

He suppressed the desires in his heard and asked.

"…… Ah, um, yes……"

Queen Silvia's continually trembling shoulders finally stilled at that moment, and she finally squeezed out words to speak.

"I saw…… without use of medication…… but everything was so clear…… that is…… t- that is…… that ……."

She raised her hands before her chest, and continued to clutch the white blanket covering her chest as though in convulsions. On the other hand, Cornelius raised his brows and gazed intently at her every action.

Queen Silvia's ability to receive divine revelations—Oracle Decrees from the Goddess Tuekay was rather weak, and thus required the usage of a profuse amount of medication with severe side effects to compensate for the weakness in her ability.

(— She said that the divine revelation this time was seen without aid of medication?)

"What sort of scene did you see?"

Cornelius couldn't help but stand.

"…… Death." Silvia said.

"This does not need to be repeated once more. More importantly, what sort of death was it?"

"By…… By sword."

(…… Sword?)

"It was…… a clear, luminous sword…… like an ice pick…… piercing through…… m- my brows!"

Halfway through her words, Silvia could not hold her emotions in anymore, and raised her voice in a shriek at the end of her sentence. Cornelius thought, the current situation was not one to fuss about royal etiquette. Thus, he stood up and walked towards the bed, embraced Silvia in his arms, patted her back and gently stroked her thin chest.

“Your Majesty, please breathe in deeply. Do not think of anything, and try to forget the pain.”

After awhile, Silvia’s hurried breathing and the throbbing on her chest finally eased.

“…… Thank you…… You may leave now.”

As she spoke, Silvia turned her head away. However, Cornelius did not follow her orders, and instead pressed his face closer.

(A future of being killed by a sword appearing in a divine revelation isn’t something that should appear under normal circumstances…… Could it be……)

“Your Majesty, please inform me of the details of the divine revelation.” Cornelius said.

“Leave me!”

“In the divine revelation that descended, was the person killed really you, Lady Silvia?”

Cornelius’s question made Silvia freeze, as though her subject before her was clenching her heart with his hands , causing her heartbeat to still temporarily.

“…… W- What did you say……”

Silvia asked as though she was moaning.

(That’s right, if she receives divine revelation at this time—)

All of it was originally just Cornelius’s speculations, but the speculations turned into firm belief after Silvia’s reaction.

(If a divine revelation descends at this time, then it is definitely related to that matter.)

“What are you saying? I- I am……”

“In the divine revelation, the person pierced with a sword was actually your elder sister, isn't that right?”

It was as though Silvia’s frozen face would turn into fragments with a gentle push of a finger. Cornelius felt extremely satisfied and pleased with his accurate speculations, and proclaimed to the queen before his eyes: “Lady Silvia, your sister— Lady Minerva has been found.”

Cornelius excused himself from the Queen’s bedroom and returned to the white, deathly silent corridor once again. He saw a crowd of shrine maidens gathered at a corner. Among them, the one standing at the foremost in tiptoes ran towards Cornelius with light, almost soundless footsteps. The shrine maiden had her face veiled with a blue sash, and there was a badge of a swan embroidered on the knee of her white gown, symbolizing the follower of the Goddess Tuekay, Goddess Smeulna.

“Lord Cornelius, does anything require your presence here at the inner palace? I have told you countless times, if you wish to have an audience with the Queen, you must allow us to inform Her Majesty of your request!”

The shrine maiden stopped a few steps from Cornelius and complained with her voice as clear as a plucked string.

“I heard that an ominous revelation from the Goddess Tuekay descended upon the Queen, so I came to give my regards. Incidentally, it is more besmirching to Goddess Smeulna’s name for Hieronihica to be absent from Her Majesty’s presence at these times.”

Cornelius saw her wince below her veil.

Cornelius’s meeting with Hieronihica this time made him recall his inconceivable sense of unpleasantness whenever he met her. He once asked Galelius of the reason, and Galelius told him that from his memories, Hieronihica maintained her beautiful, unblemished appearance without a trace of wrinkles from about twenty years ago.

“Even if you are the leader of the court, this is still not something that you should be worried of!”

Hieronihica ignored Cornelius’s sarcasm, and instead berated him with a stern tone.

“Besides, why did you not submit an official report?”

“What report?” Facing Hieronihica’s question, Cornelius tried to force through with a look of feigned ignorance. Seeing his reaction, Hieronihica asked the shrine maidens behind her to leave. After hearing her order, they glanced at Cornelius with a look of unease, but still left their side quickly.

“It’s regarding Lady Minerva. It is my belief that you already know of this matter.”

Currently, only Cornelius and Hieronihica were left in the area. That moment, Cornelius lowered his voice and answered her question.

“I do not think there is a need for people of the Inner Palace to know of this.”

“I shall be the one to decide whether there is a need after I hear it. After all, the severity of this matter involves the survival of the Celestials! And you still say that this matter does not need to be reported to the Inner Palace?” Hieronihica said in a firm tone.

(It seems like this person already considers herself a member of the Celestials.)

Cornelius strongly thought, for a mere priestess like Hieronihica only in charge of serving the Queen to actually hold such immense power, it was a colossal mistake of the Three Great Duchies.

“Then what is the Inner Palace planning to do? We are in charge of sending the military to search for her, so regarding the handling of this matter—“

“The Queen should be the one to decide what to do!”

Hieronihica directly interjected without waiting for Cornelius to finish his words. However, while that was what Hieronihica herself said, it could be seen in her eyes that what she was truly saying was that the power of decision should be in her hands. In other words, although Silvia was the Queen, she did not have any power to decide things by herself at all.

“In any case, we will bring Lady Minerva back to the palace. After all, she is an indispensable presence to the Celestials. Although Her Majesty’s emotions might be troubled right now, I believe she will make the same decision after she calms down as well.”

“No, you cannot bring Lady Minerva back to the palace!”

Hieronihica abruptly denied Cornelius’s opinion, causing him to frown.

“Lady Minerva abandoned the Celestial Kingdom, and is a person who grew up on tainted soil. If she is brought back without further considerations, it will only cause meaningless confusion— No, it will only bring disaster if she is allowed to live on!” Hieronihica said.

(I understand now.)

Cornelius laughed to himself in his heart.

(Currently, although the Queen’s power of foresight is weak, the priests of the Inner Palace does not care about that. Instead, an easily manipulated queen like Silvia will be more to their benefit.)

“Then what do you think should be done, in your opinion?” Cornelius asked.

“I do not know. That will be for Her Majesty to decide. However, I am of the opinion that if Lady Minerva was never born in this world, perhaps the world might have been more peaceful.”

(In other words, we should kill her?)

“…… Nevertheless, the military will be in charge of searching for Lady Minerva for the moment. People from the Inner Palace should not get ahead of themselves and do as they wish.”

With his sense of unease escalating, Cornelius added a proclamation to pin down the Inner Palace leader before him— Priests in the Inner Palace had numerous means that were hard for the dukes, as Consort Prospects, to grasp or guard against. Because of that, if he did not attach a warning to his words, they might take action as they please.

“As for you, Hieronihica, as the administrator of the Inner Palace, shouldn’t you have more urgent matters that require your attention? Please hurry up and decipher Her Majesty’s divine revelation— Who was the one to kill Her Majesty? After all, this matter might be related to Lady Minerva as well.”

Cornelius’s words caused Hieronihica’s face to cloud over.

"…… Where is Lady Minerva currently?"

Facing Hieronihica's question, Cornelius thought telling her that should be fine, and thus answered: "She left the battlefield with her unit, and should be at Zaccariesco right now."

The great wall of Zaccariesco was known as the best in the Eastern countries.

It would require a journey of around five days to cover the distance between the city and Santuario. However, a mountain range stretched out between them. The warm climate here was almost like in a different world compared with the severe cold at the center of the Celestial Kingdom. Apart from that, an abundance of silver mines were buried in the mountains, while the part facing the sea had deep, wide coastlines that could serve as harbors. The advantageous geographical conditions had allowed Zaccaria to become the richest country among the Seven Countries of the East.

There was a large market on the main road in the city district directly outside the Zaccaria Castle. Even though the country was currently engaged in precarious warfare, the scene in the market was unimaginably lively. There were crates stuffed full of fruits, pots of salted marine products transported directly from the harbors, smoked meat made of animals such as cows, pigs and deer, and also silk and woven products from far-sailing ships. Chris was walking on the streets. The sword decoration on his chest was exceptionally eye-catching, and there would even be girls hailing him wherever he walked to ……

"You're a member of the Order, aren't you? I can give you a nice discount!"

"Just give these babies to the people in the city. It's free of charge, as long as you bring more people over here tomorrow!"

"Boy, us big sisters have a shop just around the corner. Do you want to play with us?"

"…… It's okay, I don't have any money."

Some time before, Chris painstakingly found a skilled smith, and used up all his money to pay him to patch up all his armor, and since he was wearing high-class products, the maintenance fee was exceptionally hefty as well. Because of that, he declined each and every one of the people thinking of fishing money out of him, and walked directly towards the castle gate. Seeing the small sword on his chest, the two sentries guarding the castle gate allowed him to enter without a word. That was rather convenient to him, but he still hadn’t got used to such treatment. In truth, even the articles he was wearing , clothing with delicate textures favored by noblemen, the hat with a wide brim, each and every one of them on him caused him great unease. However, due to Francesca’s personal preferences, she forcibly stipulated that every member of the personal guard was required to wear their best.

The infantry of the Order was undergoing training in an orderly manner at the spacious courtyard outside the castle. As Chris stood in the sweet air and warm sun while gazing at the soldiers wielding spears on the castle wall, the anxiety that surfaced in his heart surpassed the feeling of liveliness he felt in the market.

— Is this really fine? Can I really stay in such a place?

— Shouldn’t I be waving my sword in a fight on the battlefield with my body stained in blood? Isn’t that place where I belong to?

He walked into the castle with his head drooped. Francesca's bedroom was at the top of a long flight of stairs. He knocked on the door and heard an imperious shout from behind ……

"— Back!— Everyone, prepare for battle!"

Chris turned around in surprise, seeing from the corridor the silhouette of a girl standing on the terrace. Her golden hair waved in the sun, and she was holding …… a command staff? Was it Francesca?

Chris thought that it was somewhat odd, and thus walked towards the terrace to reaffirm the person.

"Annihilate the enemies— This voice doesn't sound right……"

"…… Paola? What are you doing?" Chris asked.

"— Hyaaaaaaaaa!"

Hearing the call behind her all of a sudden caused Paola to jump in fright. She hurriedly removed the golden wig, hid the command staff in her hands behind her and squeezed out a smile: "Ah, um, it's Chris…… Your injuries seems to have healed. That's great……"

“Um…… You were just—“

“N- N- N- N- Nothing at all!”

Before Chris finished his words, Paola hurriedly pushed him into the corridor; and the object she was holding was indeed the command staff used by Francesca.

“T- This is a secret, so you can’t tell anyone!”

“I won’t tell……”

What Chris meant was, even though he saw Paola imitating Francesca, he didn’t know anyone to confide in, and didn’t know how to talk about it as well.

“…… Where is Francesca? Isn’t she in her room?” Chris asked.

“She doesn’t seem to be in, but I think she’ll be back very soon.”

Chris sighed after hearing that.

Previously, he told Francesca that he had something to tell her, and it was precisely the time they agreed on. However, from his conversations with the other soldiers, it seemed like she usually wouldn’t remember her promises with other people, and such a situation was already commonplace.

Paola looked at Chris and seemed to take pity on him, and thus quickly put on the wig, saying to Chris: “T-Then let me take Lady Fran’s place. Just treat me as her and tell me if there’s anything you wish to speak of— No , I should say, just tell me if there’s anything!”

She even raised the command staff and erected it on the ground. Chris couldn’t help but look at her with a chilly gaze.

“S- Sorry……” Forlorn, Paola removed the wig with a tearful expression, a depressed expression showing on her face at the same time.

“It’s fine, my bad.”

However, Chris just couldn’t understand why she prepared a wig, and did such idiotic-looking actions……

“Actually, I was enlisted into the Order as Lady Fran’s substitute at first.”

Paola sat down on the bench on the terrace and muttered.

“…… Substitute?”

“That’s right. Lady Fran and I were raised by the same nanny, so we grew up playing together. After that, when Lady Fran became the Captain of the Order, her father, that is, the Duke, was worried of her, so he asked me to accompany her as her substitute, saying that I look like her as well……”

After hearing that, Chris thought of asking how she resembled Francesca, but before he spoke, he stared at Paola’s face. After a close look, Chris thought that their noses and eyes might look somewhat similar, but the aura given out by the two of them wouldn’t make one link them together as the same person.

“But Lady Fran told me to ignore something as unstylish as being a substitute, and then asked me to join her personal guard. I told her that I couldn’t use weapons and refused, but she was determined to have me join, saying that I could lead the troops in her stead during necessary moments…… How could that even be done…… Last time, just running frantically with the troops while holding a flag made me think that I couldn't do anything……"

Paola recalled the battle where the Order of the Silver Egg faced enemy cavalry in pursuit while her shoulders continued to tremble.

"You did well, so don't worry. Actually, it's all thanks to you that we were saved."

Seeing that she looked rather downcast, Chris sat by her side, thinking that doing so would cheer her up.

"R- Really?"

Paola covered her face while looking at Chris with her obviously uneasy eyes hiding behind her fingertips. Chris nodded. He heard the soldiers praising the accuracy of Paola's timing for the unit to turn back.

"…… If it's true…… Then it's great."

Chris looked at her, thinking that with her shy smile on her flushed face and continually waving legs, she looked just like a child. He guessed that Paola should be younger than him.

"Actually, I stayed the longest in the personal guard, but I just feel that I can't help out with anything at all……"

— This girl should not stay in the army.

Chris thought, it was impossible for the people in the army to think if they could contribute to the others, because the people who are truly useless would be naturally eliminated on the battlefield.

— No, that's not right…… Judging by the standards of the Order of the Silver Egg, I am the oddity instead.

The so-called soldiers are people who act on their superior's orders, earning a living on the battlefield, only thinking of how to survive. Apart from mercenaries, the trials faced by knights would be much harsher. Chris saw numerous noblemen paying to exchange merits with mercenaries to earn more fame so that their House's standings could be improved. However, things were not the same with the Order of the Silver Egg. From the top to the bottom of the Order hierarchy, nobody held a weapon to fight because of hunger. Everyone fought for Francesca…… Chris looked at Paola, knowing that she was one of them. On the other hand, Francesca strived to defeat the Celestials, and it was the same for Minerva.

— That's why this place feels so suffocating to me.

"Actually, I thought of fighting as well, going to the battlefield holding a sword with the others. But, I just couldn't…… couldn't become as strong as Meena……"

Chris looked at the side of her drooped head.

Minerva's overwhelming strength was not totally due to the fact that she could predict the enemies' attacks. Her arms strong enough to wave huge swords and quick reactions on the battlefield were all obtained through long-term training.

— For what reason does a girl like her fight so hard to defeat the Celestials?

"…… You know when Minerva joined the Order of the Silver Egg, don't you?" Chris asked.

“Eh? Ah, yes. I know.”

“When did she join? I never heard her mention anything about her.”

“Looks like Chris only cares about Meena.”

Chris tilted his head with his jaw agape, making Paola cover her mouth in a fit of laughter.

— *I only care about Minerva?*

— *Indeed…… After all, I am staying in the Order just for her.*

Chris could sense that Minerva started to avoid him ever since the night she foresaw her death once again. Actually, it was not unreasonable that she would have such a reaction. After all, Chris was the one destined to kill her.

— *Why does she own such cruel powers?*

— *And why is she unwilling to tell me?*

“Probably about four years ago.”

Paola gazed at the soldiers undergoing training while shouting and started the story that Chris wished to learn of.

“It happened some time before our Order was formed. Lady Fran came to my room, saying in excitement that Master Carla brought a very beautiful girl with flaming red hair, and that we should go meet her. That girl was Meena.”

“Carla?”

“Gilberto’s teacher of swordsmanship, and also Meena’s as well. Master Carla ran off somewhere some time after that without any trace whatsoever.”

“Minerva and Gilberto’s teacher? T- Then, this Carla is stronger than both of them?” Chris asked in surprise.

“Master Carla? Well, I think that person probably won’t lose even if Gilberto and Meena attack at the same time.”

Paola’s words made Chris shiver. *A person who is able to deal with Gilberto and Minerva at the same time, isn’t that a monster? That’s right, I remember now. Nicolo seemed to have mentioned a teacher or something. Was he referring to Carla?*

"Master said, *it's about time for me to go for a trip*, and just like that, thought of leaving Meena temporarily in the care of the Duke's family. In the end, Francesca had one look at her, and immediately dragged her back to her room."

— It seems like Francesca always thinks of claiming beautiful things as her own, a bad habit from the time when she was little……

"After that, when Lady Fran walked out with Meena again, she said that they've affirmed an 'accurate subject-ruler relationship'."

"…… Why?"

Chris thought that it just didn't make sense. He wanted to know what Francesca and Minerva said when they were in the same room. Why else would Minerva promise to become Francesca's subordinate the first time they met?

"These are actually just my speculations, but I think Lady Fran might have known Meena from long ago." Paola said.

After hearing that, Chris crossed his arms and thought —*Having a subject-ruler relationship when they just met. Francesca already knew Minerva from before…… Judging from this, Minerva should be the daughter of a Duke or something similar. If not, saying that Minerva was actually borne of a Knight's family or lower class noble's House would be incongruent with her noble behavior and refined tastes……*

However, Chris's deductions were unable to explain the source of her mystical power.

— It seems like I have only Minerva or Francesca to ask regarding this……

— But Minerva and I are enemies, and I might even be the murderer to kill Minerva in the future……

— If so, it's understandable if she hates me. And her being unwilling to share information related to her is probably nothing as well.

"You feel concerned about Meena, don't you?"

Paola looked strangely happy when she asked. Chris nodded in affirmation while his mind was in confusion.

“But here’s a question for you, would you tell me the answer if I ask you the reason you became a wandering mercenary at such a young age, and the reason you met Meena, joining the Order after that?”

Chris noticed Paola gazing at him and looked away.

And of course, Chris could not tell her anything about that. He definitely couldn’t reveal that he was a filthy beast stained in blood and his life of struggling on the battlefields.

“Is it because you hate me? You don’t want to tell me because you hate me?”

“T- That’s not it, it’s just that—“

Chris’s words were stuck in his throat halfway through. Paola looked at him with a gentle smile and said:

“I think, Meena is probably in the same situation as you.”

“Eh……”

“In my opinion, she doesn’t hate you, but she feels scared as well.”

Chris did not know how to answer. Paola’s words were like an arrow accurately penetrating his heart.

That moment, the sounds of the soldiers’ training suddenly abated. Paola immediately jumped down from the bench and leaned towards the railing of the terrace.

“Lady Fran seems to have returned!”

Hearing her words, Chris hurriedly rose from the bench as well and lowered his gaze to look towards the courtyard. He saw a girl with gold hair elegantly passing through the surrounding soldiers who were saluting her —

“Hmm? Ehh? She’s walking to the West Hall?” Paola said in surprise.

Francesca was not heading towards the main castle where they were at, but another Hall at the back of the courtyard.

“…… I think Lady Fran really forgot about her meeting with you……” Paola said.

After having a look, Chris sighed and turned around to head towards the stairs.

That moment, Chris was still unaware that the West Hall of Zaccariesco Castle was the so-called 'inner palace' , which meant that it was the place where the bedrooms for the women of the Duke's House were at. As long as they were male, even important nobles could not approach. However, the Hall's security wasn't really strict. Chris headed to his left when he reached the courtyard and walked into the hall at the west side of the castle without being seen, and thus halted by other people. All of the servants there were women. Although they seemed surprised when they saw Chris, they did not think of stopping him, and just like that, he successfully reached the stairs in the Hall.

The reason Chris could reach Francesca's room so easily was probably because of the emblem of Francesca' s personal guard on him.

"Ah, my apologies. I completely forgot about you, Chris."

"You really did forget, huh……"

Chris leaned on the door outside the room and sighed deeply. They were actually still speaking through the door. As for the reason, it was because Francesca was currently changing into casual clothing of the court. Before that, she even asked Chris to enter to help her, but Chris thought that her joke was going a bit too far.

"Alright, you may enter."

Francesca finally finished changing her clothes, and thus Chris entered the room. The resplendent dress with its elegant design resembling petals that emphasized a woman's curves indeed suited her more than armor of military men.

"Seriously, being unable to change my clothes even though you're one of my personal guards. It's the same for Gil as well. You men are truly useless."

"…… How do you define the work of a personal guard?"

Chris was dazed by her statement, and tossed his swan down hat on his head to the chair after sighing.

"I say, this is already a team with much experience of fighting on battlefields, but picking members of the personal guard still needs to go with your interests. Don’t the other soldiers say anything?”

“Why do you think Paola took my place as the Commander when I wasn’t in the unit?”

— *What? Why mention this all of a sudden?*

“Come here and I’ll tell you.”

Chris doubtfully approached, but saw Francesca lean over abruptly as well, sticking her hand into his shirt. That gave Chris a shock, making him back away over ten steps in a hurry, pressing his body close to the door, even forgetting that he was not carrying his blade, and kept searching his waist for it.

“…… You!”

What do you think you’re doing!— was what he wanted to shout out, but his voice jammed in his throat, and was unable to be voiced out.

“Even though you’re a mercenary, you’re unexpectedly innocent when you’re facing women.”

Francesca stuck her tongue out and showed a radiant smile.

“How’s that? Having a woman’s hand directly touching your chest, this feeling is just like your whole heart was stolen, wasn’t it?”

“…… What are you trying to say?”

Chris felt his body burning as he asked her of her true intentions, and thus pulled at his shirt to evaporate the heat.

“Humans are actually a very simple species. Capturing a person’s body actually means that you’ve captured his heart as well.”

— *W- What is she saying?*

“In the Order, there is this one person who touched the skins of every member of us.”

Chris froze with his face rigid—*Someone who touched the skins of everyone in the Order…… Medics? It’s impossible for Nicolo to treat female soldiers, so it’s a female medic!*

“So that is why I allowed this person to hold the flag. She grew up with me from the time I was little, so she can understand my thoughts from my angle, it’s actually this simple. Even I myself don’t know when I will die on the battlefield, so I have an obligation to find someone who can succeed me and lead everyone here.”

After hearing Francesca’s description, Chris was relieved, and could finally breathe normally.

— *How serious is this person in the war? No, she was serious from the start, at least the matter regarding Paola was arranged as she said. After all, she did indeed lead the unit she was commanding to turn back, earning a great win for the Order.*

“While I am still alive, perhaps peace cannot descend easily. After all, the power of Three Great Duchies and the priests of the Inner Palace are giving it their all to counter us. Thinking from this angle, even effort of a hundred years might not be enough for us to burn all the old coins and to recover the true colors of the Celestials.”

Chris swallowed, raising his gaze to stare at the young Captain before her.

"— The Dukes and priests of the Inner Palace are my true enemies." Francesca said with a smile: "My flag of rebellion is not directed at the Celestials, but the nobles and priests of the Inner Palace who are trampling on the people and distorting the national political system. People who do not give it their all to protect the people do not have the right to lead a country."

From the time when he was little, Chris, who only knew of fighting, never had the awareness that the Three Great Duchies were creating political chaos and suppressing the people. However, the strong will of the Francesca that moment made Chris feel that she was extremely dazzling, lowering his head with a sense of inferiority at the same time.

— *I- I never had a reason to enter the battlefield.*

— *Even now, what I wish is just to stay by Minerva's side.*

"I cannot use swords, spears or bows. But, I have sharp eyes, a mouth that can speak, a crowd of comrades risking their lives with me, these are my weapons to victory. That is why every person, thing and object is in the position they are supposed to be at. Paola is one case …… and you are another."

Chris raised his head in surprise and saw Francesca smiling happily. She stretched her hand out to give him a push, “You came to tell me that you want to quit my personal guard, didn’t you? Wanting me to switch you to the assault unit?”

“Why…… do you…… know?”

It was indeed so. Chris felt as if his thoughts were completely seen through by Francesca.

“It’s because you’re always wearing an anxious expression, looking like you’re in so much despair that you are almost going to suffocate as long as the people around you are living people.”

Francesca laughed meaningfully, her laughter sounding like the tinkle of bells. Chris felt ashamed when he saw her smile, and thus looked away.

“Don’t you have an obligation to stay by Meena’s side? If so, isn’t staying in my personal guard the best choice?”

“But…… even if I stay by her side…… it might all be meaningless……”

Chris suddenly remembered his conversation with Minerva with a wall separating them on that night.

— Perhaps I am unable to do anything…… The only thing I can do is to hold her hand…… Even so……

— Will I kill her?

— There might be one day when I will bring an end to Minerva's life with my very hands……

Chris knew that he was staying by Minerva's side just to swallow the omens of death that she predicted. However, that moment, he couldn't help but think that Minerva might be able to live longer if he stayed far, far away from her. However, if he stayed in the personal guard, he might not be able to turn even this into reality.

— But speaking of which, why must I kill Minerva?

— We're not even enemies right now.

Chris was puzzled. Right now, whenever he talked to Minerva, she wouldn't even look at him, so they didn't have any proper conversations at all.

“You are still unwilling to tell me? What in the world happened between you and Minerva?”

Facing Francesca’s questions, Chris raised his head and nodded.

“Why? Is it because you are afraid that you will be unable to stay in the Order if you reveal it?”

Francesca’s reaction caused Chris to freeze.

She lied down on the chair and giggled. “You really don’t know how to hide anything. And I only used a tiny bit of trickery as well.”

Chris felt his ears heating up, his fingers tangling up unconsciously as well.

“Oh well, Minerva was the same at first as well, unwilling to tell me anything.”

— Minerva as well?

Chris was still completely clueless regarding Minerva. He felt that all of the deep fog hidden in his heart was already known to Minerva, but he was still unable to perceive the dark surface at the same level, or perhaps even deeper, in Minerva’s heart.

That moment, a call came from outside the room.

“Fran, I’m coming in!”

Chris was dazed for a moment, then he quickly turned around. It was Minerva’s voice.

“You may enter.”

Minerva walked into the room. That moment, she was wearing sleeveless pajamas. The pajamas looked extremely cute as well. Chris was shocked, as it was something that he never saw before on the battlefield or during training. When she saw Chris, her brows furrowed, “Why are you here? The West Hall is a place prohibited to men!”

“Eh? I- Is that so?” Chris was somewhat taken aback.

“It doesn’t really matter for Chris, he’s my personal guard after all. Besides, he’s cute.” Francesca spoke up for him.

“Those are completely irrelevant!”

“What does it matter? Besides, he has to learn how to change my clothes for me as well.” Francesca said.

“What?! Chris, y- y- you didn’t—“

“Please don’t agitate her anymore, Fran……”

Chris sighed, and then hunched his shoulders, pushing back the huffy Minerva dashing forward, “I was here to tell Fran that I’m quitting as a personal guard.”

“Quitting the personal guard? Why!”

When she heard Chris’s explanation, Minerva suddenly cried out while wearing a tearful expression, making Chris’s heart skip a beat.

“No, well……”

Chris could see his own reflection in her wet, black eyes……

— These eyes…… saw the fate of me killing her just like that?

“Because, if I come too close to you…… it’ll be too dangerous……” He said.

“T- That— That won’t change no matter where you stay at, because it’s a fixed destiny. Anyway, fate won’t change, so it’s better if you stay fore—“

Halfway through her words, Minerva suddenly noticed Francesca’s delighted gaze and hurriedly stopped.

“What’s wrong? You finished? Tell him, tell him that you want him to stay by your side forever.”

“Fran, why do you always make trouble!”

Minerva bared her fangs at Francesca, but then turned around to look at Chris with an uneasy, wandering gaze, “A- Are you really quitting as a personal guard…… Even if you- even if you don’t do that, I…….”

“I have no intention of switching him to other units. If he plans to leave the Order of the Silver Egg, I do not have any right to stop him though. Everything is up to him.”

Francesca told Minerva with a relaxed expression.

“No, you are my property, I forbid you to do so!”

Chris heard Minerva’s tone and her sincere request hidden in her heart, breathed in deeply and shook his head, “…… I’m sorry. I won’t mention this ever again.”

Hearing Chris’s promise, Minerva breathed out deeply . Even her rigid shoulders relaxed visibly.

“Now you can relax, Minerva. Right?” said Francesca in a teasing tone.

“What do you mean I can relax, like I’m really worried about it……”

“You were obviously worried. You looked like you were about to cry.”

“I did not!”

“Sorry, Minerva. It’s all my—“

“Enough! I did not come to discuss this kind of topic!”

Chris’s interruption was halted by Minerva, and at the same time, she rammed into his shoulder. She quickly walked towards Francesca and said: “Fran, hurry up and send for the troops. As quick as possible. It will be best if we can depart tomorrow!”

“Why?”

As Francesca asked, Minerva glanced at Chris. Her eyes were actually holding in moist tears, looking visibly pained.

“Some sort of an assassination unit is heading our way .” She said.

“…… Assasination unit?”

“I do not know how things stand, because I could only see us being surrounded, and when my hand was cut, the blood that trickled out was purple…… It was probably a poisoned blade.”

Minerva’s appearance and her tone when she was describing the matter was like a servant reporting that the harvest of wheat was moderate, lacking growth, making Chris shiver all of a sudden.

Chapter 8 – Distorted Blade of Poison

The sword Minerva was using was so heavy that it would need two men to barely raise it. It was three times wider than ordinary swords, more than two times thicker as well. To the unskilled, it might be even heavier than the armor.

“Carla told me that this sword is necessary for my style of fighting, and made me hold it ever since I was taught how to fight.” Minerva told Chris while sitting on her horse.

If Minerva’s sword was hung at a side of the saddle, the horse would be unable to move due to the inability to balance itself. Because of that, she would always carry the sword on her back, in the dead center.

“What kind of teacher is this…… Actually making a little girl hold a sword like this.”

Chris was taken aback at her words. However, whenever the name Carla came up in their conversation, the swordsmen riding in the same row as them would cringe. It seemed like this Master Carla was indeed a rather famous person. Just knowing that this person was

Gilberto and Minerva's teacher in swordsmanship was scary enough; it was just plain stunning that this person's way of teaching was so unequaled as well.

"Is there anything of the matter?" Minerva puffed out her cheeks and said in displeasure: "Carla once said that the weight one person is able to bear is limited. To be able to deal with every attack of the enemy, instead of dividing the weight to armor, it would be better to focus on a mobile part to raise the reaction speed and efficiency . Apart from that, attack power will increase as well."

Regarding Minerva's statement, Chris thought that such verbal theories were rather ridiculous. However, from his personal experience, Minerva's power of foresight and her arm strength did indeed prove such a theory.

"However, even Carla was shocked when I could really wave this sword……" Minerva said.

— *Then wasn't that just baseless conjecture?*

Such a thought couldn't help but surface in Chris's mind when he heard Minerva's statement.

“In any case, that is the only way of battling that I am familiar with, and the only way I know how to fight.”

While saying that, Minerva turned around to look at the long line of soldiers behind her. That moment, the Zaccarieco streets and castle that they left behind were already hidden behind a cliff, and couldn’t be seen anymore.

“It’s better to be attacked on a battlefield than in the city, since people will definitely be involved in that case.” Minerva said.

Chris understood that it was the reason she requested the troops to set out immediately, and nodded in agreement. But when he recalled that it was a future that she had seen, he couldn’t help but feel downcast.

Some time before, Chris heard Minerva’s proclamation that a unit skilled in the use of hidden weapons would attack, and thus suggested to increase the protection of the city, facing the enemies’ units at the same time. Hearing that, Minerva stared at Francesca without even turning around, seemingly agreeing with his opinions completely. On the other hand, Francesca could only shrug while giving the order to send the troops.

However, Chris thought, Minerva had no other choice but to escape from the pursuit of death on battlefields filled with death, such a life was just too miserable.

“What kind of look is that? Are you unhappy with the advanced schedule of going out for battle?”

“Eh? Ah, no, you’ve misunderstood.”

Minerva’s question when she noticed Chris looking at her from a side made him hurriedly turn his gaze to the sword on his belt.

“Meena, though that kiddo came back to the crowded streets with us after so much, he never went out to have fun at all. I think he might even be happy that we’re going out for battle early!”

The surrounding knights heard Minerva’s question and gradually interrupted one after another.

“I’ll say that he reaaaaaally likes fighting, doesn’t he? This guy’s personality is seriously shocking, just like you, Meena!”

“That’s right, we went through so much tricking him to a whorehouse, and he actually ran away just like that!”

“What, y- you went to a place like that!” As Minerva cried out, she suddenly kicked Chris’s stirrup.

“I only went as far as the door, and I wasn’t late to the practice after that either!” Chris explained hurriedly.

“It’s not the problem of being late or not!” Minerva retorted.

“Eh? Then…… What problem would that be?”

“That—” Minerva froze all of a sudden when Chris asked her with his eyes wide, and hurriedly looked away while pursing her lips. The surrounding men smiled wryly at the same time.

“You are my, my tool. How can you loiter around as you wish without my permission……”

Without turning back, Minerva spoke of the heart of the problem she mentioned in a soft voice.

“Ah…… S- Sorry.”

Chris clenched his fists and placed it on his knees— *T-That's right. I am Minerva's umbrella, and I exist to shield her from the hurricane of her death omens.*

"I'm sorry. I won't go half a step away from your side anymore."

"I- I said— that's not the problem!"

"Eh…… That's not the problem either?"

"Ah, well…… A- Actually it's not wrong…… But……"

Minerva still didn't turn back, speaking in garbled, stumbling sentences. From the start, her feet on the stirrup kept fidgeting, causing even the horses to keep looking back at her with puzzled gazes. There were even some knights who were not able to hold in their mirth anymore.

That moment, Chris urged his horse closer and spoke in a low voice by Minerva's ear:

"Say, did you manage to identify what kind of people were in the assassination unit?"

Minerva shook her head and said quietly: "…… No. I did not even hear sounds of friction of the armor on them . I know that their movements do not emit any noise, but I am still unable to grasp their traits. Excluding the images that surface in my mind in battles, I usually see only blurry images, and am unable to see them clearly."

— So that's why Minerva has higher chances of surviving only in battlefields. Chris bit his lip.

Just at that moment, the leader of the main force raised a small flag and waved it slightly. It was the signal of the investigation unit's return.

In the evening, the Order of the Silver Egg arrived at a position close to a military unit of the Celestial Kingdom that was about to move north. Francesca ordered the troops to hide in the forest and await further orders, bringing a small unit including Chris to a place where they could have unobscured vision.

"What is the matter with those people's strongholds? We've never seen such a model before, have we?" One of the officers asked Francesca, who was at his side, when he saw a crude fort towering over the place on a cliff some distance away from a patch of barren ground.

"That seems to be a military fortress remodeled from an old monastery. However, this fortress is truly positioned at a troublesome geographical location."

Francesca spread a map and muttered as the map fluttered continually in the wind.

Chris knew that quite a few forts of the Principality army were remodeled in this way. As the residents living at the edge of the Queen's land were suppressed due to their belief in the Palkai gods, many of the churches and monasteries fell into disuse when the believers and clergymen moved away.

"I think they're probably staying there to wait for the other units originally stationed in the south."

An old knight expressed his views in a low voice. Francesca nodded as well.

"I'd say that this unit has about two thousand men. But how do we stop them from joining the other units, thus expanding their power?" Another asked.

"Let's burn their rations." The young commander voiced out her view after she heard the problem: "We'll feint a direct attack, dispatching another unit to attack from below the cliff."

"From below the cliff? How do we do that? Isn't that impossible?"

"A monastery like this should have an opening for them to throw out the trash on the side of the wall facing the cliff— Chris, you probably came across quite a lot of similar forts on the battlefields before this, didn't you? Have you seen such a design?"

Francesca suddenly turned her attention to Chris, causing him to be startled, but he still managed to nod.

"But the opening probably isn't being used anymore— Over there, can you see it? There are a few piles of white things at the bottom of the cliff."

Chris heard Francesca's explanation, narrowing his eyes to look at the direction of her pointing finger at the same time— Indeed, there were a few piles of white objects accumulated at a patch of ground where it was less steep. And those were……

“Human bones.”

When Francesca finished her words, the surrounding soldiers’ eyes widened in shock. The reason they had such a reaction was not because they found out that those were human bones. Soldiers risking their lives on the battlefields would not feel surprised at such a small matter. The thing that stood out to them was the fact that the bones still had human shape.

“This seems to be a punishment commonly used by the early Palkai church. They would spread a special type of oil on the bodies of sinners, allow the oil to solidify on their bodies, and then let them bake to death on execution sites as tributes to their gods. The soldiers of the Celestials find these things revolting, so they don’t usually approach this opening.”

“We don’t feel like approaching either……”

“Feels like we’ll be cursed by the heavens if we touch these corpses……”

After the valiant soldiers heard Francesca’s explanation, each of their faces clouded over. In fact, the awe for the Palkai gods was still deeply rooted in the hearts of the people of the Seven Countries of the East. After seeing that, Francesca shrugged and smiled disdainfully, “I have no other choice but to choose impious men to join this assault unit then.”

When night fell, the Order of the Silver Egg split into two units. The unit in charge of the feint walked out of the forest under Francesca’s instructions while holding torches, and would definitely be quickly noticed by the troops stationed in the fort.

“…… S- So after a while, w- we’ll be heading out!”

In the darkness, Paola turned around and said to the other unit. The assault unit that she was leading consisted of around two hundred men. Chris was in the unit as well. He turned around to look at the soldiers behind him. They were all younger people. Apart from Chris, he could see Minerva with her red hair as well, and even Gilberto was in the assault unit. Looking from this perspective, the personal guard formed by Francesca was just mere formality. She was just keeping people she liked at her side. When there was truly a need for it, all of these people could be relinquished of their duty to protect their mistress, joining the frontline for battle.

“During reconnaissance, Gilberto made some markings at the base of the cliff. So…… So…… Although we might not be able to see these markings at night, we can follow Gilberto up the cliff. Five men will go up first and let the rope down. At most, two people can be on the rope together at one time, and if you’re noticed by the enemy in the process…… Um…… Even if you’re halfway up, you must still come down and disperse, leaving the people who succeeded to battle alone. But it’s fine even if the enemy provisions aren’t completely burnt down. Do remember not to go in too deep.”

Paola stumbled over the battle plan in one go, and then heaved a deep sigh after pressing her hand on her forehead. However, when she gave the order in the end, she still forcibly straightened her body, crying out with high morale: “May fortune of war smile upon us! Everyone, let us depart!”

They passed through the darkness and the wilderness as the night wind blew. That moment, Chris suddenly remembered something and asked Minerva in a low voice, "…… Say, was it during night-time that you saw yourself attacked?"

"Didn't I tell you that I don't know already!" Minerva answered with a look of displeasure: "You are extremely annoying! My power of foresight do not allow me to see each and every future."

"Okay……"

Chris answered in a voice so weak that it was almost swallowed by the roaring wind.

"But speaking of which, Minerva, from the scene that you saw, shouldn't you have stayed in Zaccariesco instead? Then wouldn't the future of you being ambushed have changed?"

"I do not know that either." Minerva narrowed her eyes in the chilly wind, "After that night, I did not see any images of a new future anymore, but actually, the movements of fate will not be easily changed, that is my conclusion formed from my past experiences. I can only dodge blades and arrows that are supposed to end my life by a fraction. Excluding these methods, fate is generally set in stone. And if there are truly other ways to change destiny, one day……"

One day…… Minerva's unspoken words were buried in the sounds of military boots trudging forwards in the wilderness. And then……

"— T- That is why!" Minerva suddenly raised her voice and spoke to Chris: "That is why you must always be at my side! Because you exist only for this, do you hear me!"

"Ah, y- yes, I know."

"You are only a shield protecting me from arrows. That is all. Do you really understand?"

"I understand. But isn't that a given?"

"W- what do you mean that's a given? So y- you said all those perplexing things while knowing your own part ?!"

"Why are you suddenly getting all worked up again……"

"Hey, Meena, be quiet!" "We're in a battle right now!" "You lovebirds can have your fight when we get back!"

The others voiced out reproof, and Gilberto even bumped Minerva with the hilt of his sword, making Minerva stay silent with her mouth pursed.

— *Can I really protect her?*

Chris gripped the hilt of the longsword on his waist, sinking into deep thought.

— *The beast is currently sleeping, and if Minerva's death omens appear at this moment……*

— *Am I truly able to stop fate of death from descending on her?*

As their feet continued to move, they gradually got closer to the cliff. In the darkness, the monastery was a pitch-black shadow, blocking the brilliance of the starry skies. Chris attempted to hide the unease in his heart.

The bones covered in solidified oil under the cliff seemed to have turned weathered. For some reason, the oil that had undergone changes was still able to reflect the starlight, presenting a translucent appearance, shocking everyone who approached into silence.

Shouts came from the fort as faint maroon of fire tinged the dark night skies. It seemed like the feint unit led by Francesca had already started their attack.

Paola gave the order to start the battle, only touching her comrades' shoulders instead of using words. Gilberto took the lead in climbing the cliff, his armor of black fading slowly and soundlessly on the rocks in the pitch-black darkness. His movements were so quick that he did not even seem like he was climbing with his hands at all. Four men, including Chris, hurried to catch up as well. Similar to Gilberto, they were carrying heavy rope ladders on their back as well. Everyone was shocked when they saw the shadow trailing down from above and his silent rock-climbing movements and speed .

When they saw the opening after they climbed up the cliff, they couldn't help but feel that instead of saying that it was a part of the monastery, it was actually more like an ordinary cave, where nothing could be seen inside due to the darkness. However, the cave was extremely large, and had a considerable amount of dust and dirt accumulated in it.

Driving the piles to let down the rope ladder was the job that required the most concentration in this battle, as they would be easily discovered by the enemy if they made any sound by driving the piles too forcefully. After the first group of soldiers mounted the cliff and let down the rope ladder, the second group led by Minerva carried the oil up. When the unit of ten holding torches climbed up, a disturbance of friction between large rocks rang at their surroundings. Gilberto and Chris noticed the abnormal situation immediately, and quickly dashed towards the light source shining on them from behind, their blades viciously stabbing into the bodies of their enemies with the momentum of their sprint at the very instant they unsheathed their swords. Two young soldiers of the Celestial Kingdom who were holding torches at a window near the trash disposal opening fell while spitting out blood. Then, Gilberto jumped into the monastery from the window, silencing the other soldier who was about to sound a warning with just one attack.

— *Can the battle at this stage continue? Or should we stop the soldiers below the cliff from climbing up?* In the darkness, Chris and Gilberto exchanged opinions with their gazes in an instant. However, they heard footsteps approaching from the steep, meandering pathway.

“Hey! There’s someone there!” “And someone already fell!” “Hurry up and tell the Captain!” “Ahhhhhhhh!”

Gilberto hurriedly returned to the trash disposal opening and made a gesture downwards.

“Stop, stop! Those on the rope ladder, get down immediately!”

Paola’s calls rang from below the cliff.

Light from a few torches appeared in the tunnel, illuminating the silhouettes of the Order’s assault unit. Less than fifty men managed to climb up. They walked behind Gilberto, the luminescence of their torches lighting up the whole tunnel as they continued to move.

“Enemies—“

“What, this side as well?!”

They cut the throat of a soldier whose face was full of fear and continued moving, leaving behind the corpse on the ground. The run-down monastery gave people the feeling that it was swaying slightly. They even felt that the aged rock building might collapse at any time.

"Ignore the small fries. We're heading directly to the basement!"

In the lead, Gilberto called while suppressing his voice . After all, if an enemy soldier appeared at the side of the cramped pathway, their group would be cut off from the middle. That was definitely a bad thing. Chris suddenly saw a suit of armor of the Celestial Kingdom flit past his eyes as he passed a branching pathway, and instinctively cut down the soldier's arm in an instant. The spear was thrown backwards along with the severed limb and collided with the wall, creating small sparks.

The basement where Gilberto made the markings when he went inside for scouting was indeed the place where the military provisions were stored. The five sentinels stationed there were instantly silenced by the members of the Order. They hurriedly poured oil on the hill of wooden crates and sacks, setting fire on them after that. A thick, charred smell and soot permeated the high-ceilinged vault as the blazing flames lit up the large stone pillars supporting the ceiling and the alcoves on the wall.

Chris looked around, thinking that the place might not be a storeroom, but an underground cemetery. And since the place was so extensive, even the large-scale fire was unable to illuminate the end of space.

“Gilberto, enemies are approaching!”

“Hey, this place should be a dead end, so are we going back to the corridor to meet them head-on?”

Hearing the cries of his subordinates at the entrance, Gilberto immediately answered: “You guys move the hoard of provisions to the entrance and burn them. Get some time for us— Minerva! Head inside. The wall there looks unstable. Break it down and we can get out from there.”

“What sort of digging tool are you treating my sword as!”

Minerva grumbled instantly, but still ran towards the end of the room supported by stone pillars with her large sword on her back. However, she stopped halfway along the way. Chris saw the silhouettes behind a pillar, lit up by the fire. Minerva was planning to bring down the person along with the pillar when a cry suddenly rang at that moment:

“— Wait a minute, please wait!”

After that, a silhouette ran out from behind the pillar. The radiance of the torches shone on a young female garbed in gray. Bands were bound on her head and her waist, showing her identity of a nun who devoted herself to the Palkai gods. Behind her, quite a few women wearing similar clothing and also three bald men wearing black priest robes walked out together.

"Identify yourselves!"

Minerva raised the sword in her hands and interrogated the people who suddenly appeared. Chris quickly ran to Minerva's side as well. The other members of the Order followed behind them, making the nuns hide behind the pillar in fear once again. One of the men wearing a priest's robe hurriedly waved his hands as he explained: "O- Our identity is as you can see…… We were chased out from Santuario, and were planning to seek refuge with the churches in Zaccaria. We arrived at this monastery halfway through your journey, but met the troops of the Celestial Kingdom here. In the end, we were locked in this place!"

Chris glanced at Gilberto, who had just arrived.

“Have the women remove the veils on their faces first. ”

Gilberto said coolly. Chris perceived the suspicion of these people’s identity from his words. The nuns exchanged gazes and timidly removed the veils covering their faces after a few quiet words with the priests.

The priests’ heads were extremely smooth as medication was used so their hair dropped off since youth. That was proof that they had dedicated themselves to the gods.

“Fine. I believe you.”

Gilberto said as though he was sighing. Minerva and the other knights lowered their swords gradually as well.

“You can escape with us, but if you encounter any trouble, we definitely won’t help out. We cannot guarantee the safety of your lives as well. It is best for you to resign yourself to the danger of getting dragged into death at any time when you are near us.”

Hearing Gilberto’s proclamation, the priests nodded one by one. That moment, Chris suddenly felt a sense of dissonance from them. From the time these people arrived at the end of the spacious basement along with Minerva until he saw her break down the wall before their eyes, that feeling did not disappear.

— *These people feel strange.*

Chris did not doubt their identity as clergymen, but he felt that the presence given off by them was somewhat ominous.

— *Yes, it's the eyes……* Chris noticed that their gazes were not focused on Gilberto when he questioned them, but instead, they flitted between the other people, lingering especially on Minerva. They kept looking at Minerva, as though they were scheming something.

— *Am I just thinking too much?*

All of a sudden, the flames behind them swayed tremendously, causing the shadows on the stone pillars to shake vigorously as well— the flow of air had changed due to the large hole that was drilled open on the wall.

"You can leave first. I shall stay to bring up the rear."

After Minerva said that, the other members ran outside together. Various sounds caused by the blazing fire resounded behind them: sounds of wooden crates collapsing, windows cracking and roars of pursuing soldiers. There was a space outside the hole opened by Minerva, its low ceiling giving people a sense of heavy oppression. Numerous neatly arranged depressions could be seen on both sides of the walls.

— *A bone storage room?*

It was the moment when everyone ran into the bone storage room with only Chris and Minerva staying to bring up the rear that Chris' suspicion towards the clergymen solidified into a concrete sense of danger. After the priests and nuns watched Minerva break down the wall from afar, they stealthily approached while suppressing their footsteps. After that, murderous aura made Chris swing the longsword in his hands subconsciously.

Shrill noise of metallic collision rang, a noise that would even make people feel that their skulls were resonating with the sound waves. One of the nuns had taken out a dagger as fine as a needle from her robe. Her dagger met Chris' longsword at a position that almost pressed onto Minerva's side abdomen. The two forces clashed and trembled as they frantically tried to overcome each other.

Minerva reacted like a lightning bolt. Lashing out with her large sword while jumping backwards, she managed to sever the left arm of a priest who was attacking with a dagger.

"— You!"

"Meena! What's wrong!" "What happened?"

"Never mind this! Go!"

Minerva shouted while swinging her sword, cutting apart the abdomens of two nuns at one go. Countless thin daggers fell to the ground from the bloodstained clothes. Chris was surrounded by three nuns. He evaded the first attack that flashed past his neck and severed his opponent's arm, then quickly ran to Minerva's side after ramming the nun with the other two.

That moment, those people had already let go of their masks of priests and nuns, surrounding Chris and Minerva while holding their blades.

— Why are these people doing this? Haven't they already devoted themselves to the gods?

Their gazes were chilling. No matter how many wounds their comrades suffered, pure killing intent still burned in the eyes of those who remained.

"They're from the Tuekay shrines."

Minerva sighed in a low voice. Chris noticed as well that although those people were clergymen, they did not serve the Palkai gods.

"From the Celestial Kingdom……?"

While muttering to himself, Chris looked around at the assassins. That moment, one of them smirked and spoke.

"How fortuitous that we are able to meet Lady Minerva here. Now we do not need to go as far as Zaccaria. This is truly thanks to the Tuekay Goddess."

— Is it them? Were they the ones who brought the signs of death on Minerva?

— Assassins from the Celestial Kingdom?

The priest did not continue his words. Chris sensed that if they turned around to reaffirm their escape route, they would definitely be killed on that instant. In addition, if Minerva's prediction was accurate, their blades were all poisoned.

— Besides that, not one of these people are afraid of death as well.

— This…....

Must be finished in an instant. Chris passed the thought to Minerva through contact with her shoulders.

"AHHHHHHHHH!"

The two of them emanated a presence so imposing that even the faraway fire shook from its mighty force. On the instant their shoulders parted, a battle of blades immediately started. A priest took a blow from Minerva's sword, causing his body to collide with a stone pillar and debris to be showered from the ceiling as well.

As the poisoned blade flitted past the tip of Chris' hair, he dashed between two nuns, lacerating one of the nuns' shoulders. She fell even before she was able to cry out. Through the blood and froth that was spat out, Chris saw the other nun rushing at him with a swing of her dagger while stepping on her comrade’s corpse. The blade slashed past the side of his ear and hit his shoulder armor. The blow made him stumble and fall, his back colliding vigorously with the ground. He raised his longsword with his back on the ground, and pierced through his opponent’s throat the moment before she was able to cut him. Her crazed eyes nearly pressed onto Chris’s two eyes.

“Chris!”

As the call resounded, Chris’ view was obstructed by a thick blade. Minerva’s large sword was thrust into the abdomen of the nun on Chris. The nun with the cut abdomen rose. And even though she was already unable to hold her dagger properly, she still staggered towards Minerva.

That moment, the presence of another person suddenly appeared behind the nun. Chris swallowed and hurriedly stood up from the ground. A large amount of blood suddenly spurted from the nun’s throat once again. Without warning, a sword pierced through her coat. It belonged to the last priest standing behind her. He pierced through the nun’s body with his sword.

— This guy actually used his comrade's blood as smokescreen!

Minerva frowned as she tried to push the nun's corpse away. However, the blade piercing through the corpse, stained in blood and poison, was already thrust in her direction.

Chris subconsciously caught hold of the sword's tip. He was not in a position to feel the pain of his palm being pierced through, but instead, he frantically pushed the sword back with his arm and fingers. However, even if his reflexes were one step faster, he was still unable to block the force of his opponent's force, causing the tip of the blade to slide on Minerva's upper arm, carving out a trail of blood. When Chris saw the blood that trickled from the wound, his consciousness was almost sucked into the purplish-black blood in his despair.

— I…… got Minerva hurt.

— The poison……

All of a sudden, the cold, hard object was pulled away from his palm, and at the same time, pain as though his arm was viciously twisted a few rounds sank into his body. He bit his lip, and frantically held onto the pain in his body and the flickering red flames at the edge of his vision to maintain his fading consciousness.

He forced his eyes open, and saw that the heads of the priest and nun had already fallen, and were rolling on the ground.

— Minerva? Where is Minerva?

Just the action of turning his head made him feel as though the blood in his body was frothing, causing his consciousness to spin in a daze. With her sword, Minerva leant against the wall with the hole she created. The wound on her arm looked swollen with its purple color. Other members of the Order were already standing at her side.

“Hey, Chris! You—“

Chris pushed away his comrades who ran towards him, and forcedly stood up, walking towards Minerva.

“…… Idiot…… D- Don’t keep moving…… Compared to mine, the poison in your body is……”

With his eyes half-closed, he ignored Minerva’s urges, and pulled out the dagger on his chest, slitting open Minerva’s swollen wound.

“Chris! You—“ “This isn’t the time to do something like this, the enemy is almost upon us!”

The surrounding soldiers gave wail-like calls, but Chris was already unable to hear them anymore. He gouged out the flesh around Minerva’s wound and pressed his lips on Minerva’s wound. As he sucked and spat out blood, only the image of thousands of purple entangling snakes writhing around could be seen in his eyes. After that, his limbs gradually lost all feeling due to numbness as well.

Chris and Minerva finally collapsed at the same time. Across Minerva’s pale face, Chris saw the scene of military provisions being engulfed in fire. The blazing fire looked extremely like flames licking the darkness.

— Once again, everything…… is burnt down……

— Blood flowing like a river……

— Even though I vowed to protect Minerva……

— Why can't my hand move?

— I've already done my best to kill so many……

— But she still has to die in the end?

— Just like mother…… She still has to die huh……

— Just like mother……

— Like mother……

Chris felt pain as though his whole body was burnt by fire. The dark ceiling seemed to swirl continuously in his eyes.

For a number of times, he felt someone force-feed hay and bitter liquid into his mouth. A sense of nausea churned his stomach, making him feel like throwing up, but he was unable to turn around.

"Will he live through this?" "I don't know." "Any other person would have died long ago."

"He's my cute personal guard, of course I won't let him die!"

"Chris, you idiot, if you die just like this, I definitely won't forgive you!"

Sounds rang by his ears. To Chris it was as if they were churning his hearing, making him feel pain. His body continued to emit heat, causing his consciousness to blur, and he was unable to distinguish who said what. His half-closed eyelids obstructed his vision. That moment, what he could see was like a sleek, long crescent moon. However, in this sleek, long moon that was like a crescent moon, he could clearly see a girl. The girl had long hair that was a red as vivid as flames. With black eyes moist with tears, she kept calling his name.

— *Mother?*

Chris caught hold of the warmth on his palm and pleaded.

— *Mother, forgive me……*

— *Forgive me for being unable to save you……*

— *Mother……*

Chris felt like he was thrown into a hole leading to the center of the earth, or even a place deeper and darker than that, submerged in endless pain. He tried to catch hold of the rocky walls around him, but his fingers caught fire when they came in contact with the rocks, burning it all up until even the bones were burnt down.

“Mother—“

Chris returned to that night— The storeroom continued to burn in the crackling flames, with the bare roofs almost collapsing. The back of his mother caught fire, but her body had already lost the warmth that should be owned by a person, turning into a chilly corpse .

“Mother!”

He tightly held the other hand in his hand, and continued to call his mother. Hot tears burnt his cheeks, and at the same time, tortured his heart.

When he regained consciousness, the whole world was swaying slightly. The tremors continued to shake his foggy consciousness. After a while, he dimly realized that he was lying down somewhere.

When his vision recovered slightly, two faces came into his view. As his gaze was still unable to focus, he only knew that one of them was a bespectacled man, while the other was a woman with light brown hair.

"…… Chris? Can you hear me? Can you see?"

Paola raised her hand and waved it in front of Chris, and tried to prise Chris' eyelid open. Chris pushed her hand away, trying to nod, but his neck was unable to move as though it was fixed with glue. He tried to speak, but then noticed a strange feeling stuck in his throat.

"Ahhh, wait a minute! Don't breathe in, the medicine will jam in your throat if you do so!"

Nicolo extended his fingers into Chris' throat, taking out a piece of wet, green object in the shape of a ball, probably herbal medicine, and then Paola disappeared from his view in a flash.

"Lady Fran! Chris woke up, Chris woke up!"

The words drifted away, leaving behind silence that gradually spread, and also sounds of clanking metallic collisions. He finally realized that he was lying in a horse cart carrying weapons. The reason he felt the whole world swaying was because the horse cart he was on was moving.

“If I grind your flesh and bone, selling them as medicine, it will surely net me a ton of cash.” Nicolo lazily straightened his feet and said as he smiled wryly: “ What kind of body do you have there? I never saw many people who could still live after taking in so much poison .”

— *Poison……*

Chris sprang up abruptly. Numbness and pain spread throughout his whole body. He twisted his body, struggling to rid himself of the troublesome pain.

“Oh? Well aren’t you energetic. Can you walk already? ” Nicolo asked.

“— Minerva!”

The raucous call cut through his parched throat, making him feel a pain as though his throat was being torn apart.

“…… Where’s Minerva? How is she? She hasn’t……”

Chris’ first reaction after he regained consciousness shocked Nicolo. After heaving a sigh, Nicolo pointed in the direction of bamboo baskets containing bows and arrows. Cloths were messily spread on the wooden floorboards of the horse cart, and a person with messy, red hair strewn on the cloth was lying there. Chris pushed away the surrounding weapons and crawled towards Minerva. There was barely any color of blood on Minerva's face, but he could clearly see her chest rising slightly as she breathed.

"The two of you slept for two whole days. But actually , your condition should be far more serious than hers."

Nicolo was still sitting at his original position as his voice spread into Chris' ears from behind.

— Two whole days? I slept for this long?

"We've already passed by a hill. Since we can't go back to Zaccariesco right now, we're hurrying along at breakneck speed."

After saying that, Nicolo told Chris that he would get water for him, and then clambered out from the horse cart. After a while, Minerva finally opened her eyes.

After their gazes met, Minerva turned away to look outside the horse cart. The low sun shone on the floorboards in the horse cart, dying the floorboards bright crimson— *Is the sun setting? Or is it rising?* No matter which it was, Chris felt that it was rather dazzling .

As he moved his eyes, thinking of looking at the wound on Minerva's arm, pain blossomed in his eyes as though thorns were growing in his eye sockets, but he could still barely see that the position near her elbow was wrapped with bandages. He couldn't help but tightly clench his knees, "I'm sorry……"

"…… What are you sorry for?"

"I…… I nearly made you die……"

After hearing that, Minerva abruptly raised her body, but then fell onto Chris' chest due to a sudden sense of dizziness. However, she still stretched out her hands and clenched Chris' neck, "You!" The hands on his neck trembled continually, "Who told you to use such a reckless way— There isn't any poison in my body anymore!"

Chris pushed Minerva away from him and took two steps backwards, raising his right hand at the same time. He removed the bandages wrapped on his right palm with his mouth.

“What are you doing!”

Minerva cried out as she stretched out a hand to stop him, but was pushed away by Chris. The strangely itchy wound was slowly closing. He even felt clotting blood beneath the wound trying to move.

“What are you doing! Hurry up and stop, idiot— Don’ t move anymore!”

Minerva roughly wrapped the bandage back on Chris’ hand. After that, she grasped Chris’ hand.

“…… What I saw was an image of my hand being pierced through…..”

She turned her face away, so Chris could only feel the tremors in her voice and chin.

“I…… I never told you to change my fate with such a twisted way!”

— But…… Was there any other way?

“Why…… Why are you doing all this for me till this extent!”

— Why? What do you mean why? It’s because you……

— Because you are my……

“— Your mother is already dead!”

Minerva’s shouts caused the thing that was hidden in an old bone in Chris’ heart to shatter. His lips trembled slightly, and he gazed at Minerva’s face with a blank expression.

— Mother? Why mention mother all of a sudden?

“You kept calling for your mother!”

Chris swallowed in a daze— That’s right, he remembered. He did indeed have a memory of calling his mother continually. He caught hold of someone’s— probably Minerva’s— hand, gripping it tightly as he called his mother.

"No matter how much you call out for her, she won't come back to life anymore, because you've already eaten her up!"

— Yes. I was unable to save my mother…… But if it was Minerva—

"It was the same for me, I could not save my mother as well!"

Minerva suddenly screamed in agitation. That caused Chris to swallow in his ignorance.

— Minerva's……. Mother?

That moment, Minerva suddenly realized that she had let slip something that should not have been said, and hurriedly covered her mouth.

"This is of no concern to you. You had best pretend you never heard anything." She said.

"But……"

“Never mind this! From now on, just continue to stay by my side…… But you…… You, you were actually so reckless……”

Minerva entangled her five fingers between Chris’ fingers on his hurt palm, and gripped his hand forcefully .

“Idiot…… What can you get even if you did so…… Treating me as a substitute since you were unable to protect your mother……”

Her words viciously tore open Chris’ wounds. He was unable to answer. He could not do anything except for holding Minerva’s hand tightly.

The speed of the horse cart had slowed slightly. A silhouette climbed in from the back of the cart. Minerva pounded on a wooden crate by Chris and curled up at a corner of the cart.

Through the tidily arranged spears, Chris saw Francesca’s golden hair. She silently walked towards Chris, squatted by his side, stretched out a hand and extended it towards his bare chest after flipping open his shirt.

“Ack, no, Fran, my wound isn’t there!”

Flustered, Chris tried to escape, but the pain from the wound on his hand caused him to be able to crawl away, and was thus unable to run away.

“Fran! Y- You’re at it again!” With her face flushed, Minerva quickly separated the two.

“It’s your fault, as you made me think Chris can’t be saved anymore with the dark expressions on your faces.” Francesca said.

“I’m still alive, isn’t it clear from a look!”

Chris pushed away Francesca’s hand and rearranged his collar.

“I already heard it from Gil.” With a serene expression, Francesca sat down on a bamboo basket, “He said that you were attacked by a group of priests and nuns, is that right?”

Minerva glanced at Chris and nodded. Francesca pressed her hand on her forehead and sighed deeply, “I was too careless. I had thought that the future you foresaw would not be realized. I never thought that you would actually be hurt with a poisoned blade by a group of people from god knows where……”

“I never thought you would actually underestimate my oracular powers.”

“It’s because you’re still seeing futures of Chris killing you. Isn’t that right?”

Francesca said, making Minerva and Chris to hold their breath.

— That’s right, Minerva predicted a future of me killing her with this longsword as well, and these two futures……

The death omens that appeared on Minerva were contradictory.

“If so, compared with being killed by those people of unknown origins, it’s more possible for me to be killed in

Chris' hands huh……" Minerva's voice contained visibly strong anger. However, Francesca unexpectedly nodded in affirmative without hesitation.

"Why!"

Ignoring Minerva's questions, Francesca's gaze locked on to Chris.

I wouldn't kill her no matter what! Chris was angry at himself for being unable to say those words.

— She must know something! This person— Francesca definitely knows a lot of key answers. Chris sensed this from her usual attitude, while Francesca finally turned away at this moment and shook her head as she said: "Because I can't think of anyone who would want to take Minerva's life. After all, if these people were from the Celestial Kingdom, Meena would have long foreseen their identity . However, I do not think that the Consort Prospects would wish to dispose of Minerva."

"…… Those people…… were shrine maidens and priests serving the Tuekay Goddess."

Minerva's answer shocked Francesca into silence. After that she nodded weakly:

"So, the powers among the Celestials are divided into separate struggles, huh……"

— *Is Minerva anyhow related to the Celestials?* Chris was about to ask the question when he was instantly intimidated by Francesca's powerful glare, making him swallow his question.

From the gaze, Chris perceived that Francesca meant that he should ask when Minerva was willing to tell. When Francesca reaffirmed that Chris did not have any intention of speaking, she continued to speak her heartfelt words:

"…… I'll say, actually I really want to bring you two back to Zaccariesco and lock you in my room, putting on so many elegant silk robes that you won't be able to move, so that my two cute personal guards won't be hurt on the battlefield anymore. I really don't want to see you like this."

"Fran, please."

Minerva couldn't help but sigh while puffing out her cheeks.

“I joined the Order for war. As long as I am still able to hold the sword, I will stay on the battlefield forever.”

“That’s true. When your injuries heal, I’ll have to count on you to fight in the next battle as well.” Francesca said with a sigh. Although he was unsure how much was in jest, and how much was serious, Chris still caught hold of the longsword lent to him by Gilberto and nodded in agreement at his liege lord.

“Say, where are we headed to right now? And what happened to the fort?”

Minerva pressed her head with her hands, trying to clear the sense of dizziness that did not stop from the moment she awoke, saying to Francesca at the same time.

“Our attack successfully delayed their meeting with their units. And yesterday, we finally grasped battle plans of the Celestial Army as well. They are dispatching troops in four different directions, and are slowly moving in the direction of Medoccia.”

Medoccia. It was the Eastern country nearest to Santuario, and the shelter of the Archbishop who escaped from a siege on the main Church.

“How many men do they have?” Minerva asked.

“About thirty thousand.”

Francesca’s answer made Chris shudder. After all, even the battle with Princinopolis used only twenty thousand men, but the numbers of men this time far outnumbered that number.

“If we don’t make it, Medoccia will probably fall in three days.”

Francesca’s tone was calm and tranquil, like that of a person in charge of stamping documents.

Chapter 9 – Siege

The alliance treaty that was agreed on by the Seven Countries of the East when they assembled at Princinopolis was criticized by historians of a later age as the most foolish agreement made in history. Although the treaty was later rescinded under Francesca da Zaccaria's orders while a new military alliance was established, the armies of the Eastern countries were fettered by the Princinopolis Alliance before its revocation. The largest problem in it was a rigid, inviolable condition for the guarantee of mutual security — when any of the countries in the alliance was attacked, the other six countries were obligated to send reinforcements.

"If I was born ten years earlier, I definitely would not have allowed them to sign an agreement with such terms !" said Francesca, while gritting her teeth, as she sat in the horse cart: "This would only allow other people to toy with the military forces of the Alliance as they like! What an unbelievably insane agreement!"

As Chris had stayed in the Celestial Army for a long time, he could not help but agree with her statement. Some generals in the Celestial Army even said in a jeering tone, *we can play the Principality army for fools with just a little effort on our parts, like a child who is unable to counterattack, and can only flail his short limbs when you press down his head.*

“But why did the Union establish such terms in the first place?” Paola asked Francesca while grinding herbal medicine.

“It was all for the sake of the protection of the Palkai churches spread throughout the countries. With the Archbishop tearfully pleading for their help, Grandfather had no choice but to agree.” Francesca said.

As the target of the Union’s opposition was the Celestials, who believed in Tuekay, the Union required a similar spiritual symbol to solidify their beliefs. Hence, they had to use the influence of the Palkai church. However, the Celestials had long seen through the weak link between the Principality army and the Palkai churches, and thus took the initiative to crush the territories of the church, and even brought down the holy ground of the Palkai church, Princinopolis, forcing the most authoritative Archbishop to abandon the Great Cathedral, seeking refuge at Santcarillon, which was located in Medoccia. In the end, only the Princinopolis

Alliance was left between the Seven Countries of the East , and was completely unable to bring any positive effects, but merely caused them great burden.

“They then thought that the best way for them to form an army was to do it in the name of the church. However , the Great Cathedral fell not long after that, so of course they did not have the chance to form a combined unit. Our adversaries are quite sharp as well.”

Chris finally turned his gaze away— because the key person who brought down the Great Cathedral of Princinopolis was no other than Chris.

“Can’t Zaccaria just come forward to appeal to the other countries, gathering men from these countries in Zaccaria to form an army? The Duke of Zaccaria is held in high esteem by the other countries after all.”

Hearing Paola’s question, Francesca shrugged and said : “That won’t do. If we truly rebel against the Queen of the Celestial Kingdom, it would have to be in the name of the Palkai Church, as people are only willing to contribute their own power by answering the call of religion. Say, if we really wish to raise a rallying flag that is able to match the might of the Queen—“

"Haven't you had enough yet? Can we stop discussing this topic? Having a rallying flag is completely irrelevant to this matter. Everything can be settled just by destroying the Celestial Kingdom."

Minerva said coldly as her gaze continued to fixate on the scenery outside the window by Chris' side with a look of displeasure lingering on her face from some time before. Chris was startled by the venom in her tone.

The two of them had just returned from the abyss of death that was the poisoned wound, and around three days had passed since they regained consciousness. Minerva had never said even one word to Chris ever since that day. However, as they had just recovered, their bodies were still weak. Because of that, Francesca insisted that they should stay in the horse cart for the moment. In the cramped compartment, Chris and Minerva had to fidget between crates and baskets containing weapons in search of a comfortable space to rest on. However, even when their feet were close to the extent of touching, they did not look at each other, let alone talk. To Chris, it was absolutely torture. She did not talk much, and Chris never thought that she would speak as pointedly as that when she spoke.

Francesca responded with a faint smile. Minerva shifted her attention to Paola and said, “So basically, we are heading towards Medoccia just as a favor for the Archbishop? But speaking of which, being able to reach Santcarillon before it is surrounded or not is yet another problem.”

That moment, sounds of hoof beats before the cart suddenly intensified—

“Lady Fran!”

Gilberto lifted the curtain of the window at the side of the cart and poked his head in. That moment, he was riding his horse in step with the horse cart.

“There is a formation of the Celestial Army four kilometers away. They seemed to have started surrounding Santcarillon.”

“So we couldn’t make it in the end huh…… It can’t be helped then. Let us gather with the units of other members of the Union for now.”

“So you were planning not to meet up with the Union, and rushing directly into the city with our unit instead if we managed to make it in time?”

"But of course." Francesca grimly brushed her hair back, "I, for one, do not wish to discuss vapid battle stratagems with them. Besides, breaking their web of encirclement is not difficult at all."

Dusk fell. The Celestial Army was gathered before the streets of Santcarillon. Apart from Medoccia, the troops of the other six countries of the Princinopolis Alliance had already assembled on a hill at the exterior of the city of Santcarillon where the whole area could be seen. Among them, although some of the troops including the knights from Zappania had already received reports of the Celestial Army's siege on Santcarillon, they just waited for the troops of the other countries on the hill without any strategy in mind, and watched just like that as the troops of the Celestial Kingdom completed their web of encirclement little by little.

— Looks like our efforts of attacking the stronghold modified from the monastery and delaying their troops from gathering were all for naught.

— The Allied Army of the Union is so foolish, it's no wonder people call them a ragtag army.

Right now, it was definitely possible for Chris to recall tens of jokes criticizing the Allied Army from the days when he was still in the Celestial Army. However, when he was among the Allied Army in person, he actually realized that the actual situation was far more laughable than the contents of the jokes.

“They say that the Duke of Medoccia is currently in negotiation with Lord Cornelius himself.”

“Good grief, this means we can’t attack as we like before they come to a consensus.”

“That’s right.”

With a leisurely demeanor, the commanders of the six countries sat before a meeting desk in a spacious tent. Chris observed the process of their conference while sitting behind Francesca. Seeing the cold, indifferent expression on Gilberto’s face, Chris couldn’t help but admire his astonishing patience, as he was still able to hold himself back when he was facing the situation before him.

“Is it true that they are willing to back down as long as the Duke of Medoccia hands over the Archbishop?”

“Apart from that, they demand the surrender of the city of Santcarillon.”

“Before we are sure of what the Duke of Medoccia wants, we are truly unable to do anything.”

Chris thought that it wasn’t the time for such foolish words. After all, Duke Medoccia was still in Santcarillon. With the presence of the Celestial Army’s airtight web of encirclement, it was impossible for the Allied Army to contact Duke Medoccia. Besides, if Duke Medoccia truly handed over Santcarillon, the time required for the Celestial Army to reach the six countries would only be around five days if they wished to attack.

Apart from that, Chris had long noticed that in their conversation, the commanders of the other five countries kept drifting towards Francesca. Complicated emotions were interweaved in those gazes, like they were thinking that it was inappropriate for a girl to appear on a battlefield. However, she was the daughter of the Zaccarian duke, so they could not afford to be rude to her. In addition, the fact that she had won more battles than all others present added together caused them to be wary of her as well.

That moment, Francesca abruptly stood up from her seat, causing the hearts of the surrounding generals of the other five countries to skip a beat.

“Generals of the Alliance, apart from we of the Zaccarian army, did any other country bring battering rams?”

The surrounding generals stared at each other blankly at her question.

The said battering ram was a cart carrying a huge pole used during assault to batter down the city entrance.

“Why would anyone bring battering rams? We are here as military support for Santcarillon. There shouldn’t have even been a need for that!”

“Why do we have to bring down the entrance of Santcarillon? That would only serve to gladden the Celestial King!”

“The way we are doing nothing right now is of no help . Thanks to the Duke of Medoccia for delaying the time of assault of the Celestial Army, we should now be breaking in through the east entrance, where the enemy forces are the least concentrated.”

Francesca’s proclamation caused an immediate commotion in the tent— Among the people present, not one had the authority to deny the chief commander of the Allied Army. Because of that, each of the generals of the other five countries raised objections at her words.

“Lady Francesca, please do not jest. If we are to bring down the east entrance of Santcarillon, the Celestial Army will attack right from that side!”

“Yes, that is exactly what I wish them to do. Currently, we are completely in the dark as to where they are going to attack. Because of that, we cannot even defend the city. However, if we open a hole in the dam, we can clearly know where the flood will be headed. What’s left would be for you to launch an attack behind the troops of the Celestials.”

Chris heard Francesca’s declaration before the conference table, dumbstruck.

“If we ask Santcarillon to let us in themselves, they will surely know that it’s our strategy to lure them out. So, we must break down the city door as though we are going to bring down Santcarillon. After all, if the Archbishop continues to stay in the city, waiting for

Cornelius to capture him as he brings down the city, it will definitely dampen his enthusiasm, making him feel that the following battle is meaningless as well.”

At Francesca’s proclamations, the other generals continued to look at each other mutely, while she continued to speak in an icy tone: “Since no other units brought battering rams, there is no need for further discussions. We of the Order shall launch our assault at daybreak tomorrow.”

“Wait a minute! Zaccaria’s—” “You can’t just decide by yourself! The negotiations between the Duke of Medoccia and the Celestial Kingdom have yet to—”

After finishing her words, Francesca turned around and headed towards the exit of the military tent. Chris followed hurriedly. In the end, Gilberto, the last member of the Order left, walked out of the tent as well after stopping the protests of the people in the tent with a gaze .

Francesca said as she returned to the campsite of the Order:

“The worst outcome of this siege is for the Duke of Medoccia to open the city gate, handing over the

Archbishop with no casualties for both armies. So, we must open the East Gate of Santcarillon while the Celestial Army's net of encirclement is still imperfect. If so, when we bring down Santcarillon after it is taken by the Celestial Kingdom, Santcarillon will become our best breakthrough point."

"Does that mean you are planning to give up on the city of Santcarillon?"

Chris said to Francesca with a look of disbelief— From her words, he perceived that Francesca proposed her strategy on the standpoint that Santcarillon was already under the control of the Celestial Army.

"What else do you expect me to do? It's impossible to defend successfully in this battle. The Allied Army is in a state of complete disunity. Sigh, if the Archbishop did not escape to Santcarillon, but the Zaccariesco Castle, things wouldn't have been so troublesome."

Chris finally realized Francesca's true intentions from her words. She was planning to charge into the city before the Celestial Army's net of encirclement was completed to rescue the Archbishop first. After all, if the Duke of Medoccia agreed to negotiate with Cornelius of the Celestial Army, he would definitely hand over the Archbishop without hesitating. On that very instant, the Archbishop was probably breaking out in cold sweat as he looked upon the sea of purple flags outside the city. Because of that, Francesca's rescue of the Archbishop would be her last move for her to gain control of the Allied Army— so that the whole Allied Army would unite under the Silver Hen flag of the Order of the Silver Egg.

"Chris, have you recovered?"

While asking, Francesca did not turn around to look at Chris. Chris was unsure if she perceived his nod.

The injury of his hand had already healed, and Nicolo could finally stop being shocked each and every time he examined Chris. The feeling of weakness that lingered in his limbs had completely vanished, and he currently felt only a slight dullness in his body, perhaps due to the fact that he kept lying on a horse cart before that.

— But where should I position myself on the battlefield this time? Is it really okay for me to stay in this campsite?

— Can I…… continue to stay by Minerva's side?

Francesca seemed to have seen through the Chris' wavering heart, "I want you to be our vanguard once again. The same goes for Meena."

Chris returned to the tent shared by the Captain and Elite Guards before the others, due to the fact that his brands started to give off scorching heat. There should have been some time before the new moon. But for some reason, the brands on his forehead and the back of his palm already started aching after the end of the military meeting, when he was looking at the faraway Celestial Army surrounding Santcarillon. Chris wondered if it was due to the wound from the poisoned blades, or perhaps …… it was because he saw the emblem of two adjoining unicorns fluttering on the flags that was a purple more brilliant than the last rays of twilight.

Cornelius. His brand reacted the first time they met as well. That happened on the night before the new moon.

— *Who in the world is he?*

— *He was dangerous. Just thinking of him gives me the chills.*

— Not only was it due to his fiendish swordplay. Nor was it because of his cruelty.

— It was something that was much, much more abominable ……

Chris could not comprehend it. The only thing he could be sure of was that his brand was hurting. He fled back to the campsite, not wanting Francesca or Gilberto to know about it.

The tent was devoid of any people. Everyone was out, preparing for the assault at dawn of the next day. It was almost time for the sun to set.

Minerva and Chris were to carry out the assault plan after a little while. In the past, he had succeeded in tens of assaults. Hence, Francesca's decision for him to take part in the plan was undoubtedly fitting, from a tactical perspective.

— Even though she knew that I am the Star Eater. That I was the cursed beast who left his comrades to die, living on by myself.

— That I was unable to protect Minerva from the poisoned blades.

— Or was precisely because I was by her side? The future of death that she was supposed to evade was brought into effect because of the beast in me?

— This time…… I might be the one to make Minerva die.

Minerva's greatsword rested on one of the pillars in the tent. Once before, that very sword had shattered Chris' weapon, the very sword that was supposed to kill Minerva.

Chris' attention was suddenly attracted by something that was hung on the hilt of the greatsword. It was the white, wing-like robe that Minerva always wore on the battlefield, the top part of it where the collar and sleeves adjoined.

Why does she wear this when she is in battle? was the thought Chris had when he first saw it.

If I don't wear armor, I can foresee any attack on me beforehand, was what Minerva had told him. *Besides, carrying metal on me will only hinder my evasion speed.* Watching from the sidelines, Chris could only feel uneasy about it, as Minerva was not completely immune to harm.

— Instead of wearing such visible clothing with wide sleeves while battling, donning light armor that can block arrows would be better.

Chris held the collar of the shirt that was stained a pale red.

— This is……

At the back of the clothing, there was a picture embroidered with cotton thread of a different color. As it was rather dark in the tent, Chris could not see the pattern of the picture clearly. He walked around the pillar, squatted down at the corner of the military tent and pulled up the thick canvas cloth of the tent, shining the light outside on the part of the clothing where the picture was on. He couldn't help but gasp when he finally recognized the picture.

It was the picture of a wheel with open wings.

A symbol of the Celestials that she was supposedly unable to forgive— the goddess, Tuekay.

— On Minerva's clothing, the Celestials'……

— This means, Minerva is truly……

That moment, footfalls suddenly rang in the tent. Chris looked around abruptly and saw a silhouette at the entrance of the tent, a person with red hair falling on her slender shoulders. It was Minerva. Chris reflexively grabbed the robe and hid it in the shade behind the greatsword, concealing himself at a blind spot of the tent with bated breath.

— What am I doing? Why am I hiding?

When she entered the tent, Minerva pulled down the veil at the entrance of the tent, shrouding the tent in sudden darkness. Chris originally planned to stand up and call Minerva, but was then halted by the subtle atmosphere.

Light footsteps approached Chris' direction.

The sound of friction between clothing and body rang from the place where the footsteps stopped. Chris almost cried out in panic.

In the dark space, he saw Minerva's coat falling from her slender body. Among the faint light, the soft, lustrous skin had a tinge of light blue.

— Uh oh, I can't possibly call out to her now!

Chris felt his cheeks burning. After that, a throbbing sound rang by his ears. He only realized after some time that it was actually his own heartbeat.

Minerva hugged her chest in the dark tent with her upper torso bare. Her exhaled breaths exposed the worry in her heart. Chris told himself that he should not look, but his eyes just couldn't move away from Minerva's body. However, when Minerva moved to loosen her belt, Chris couldn't help but cover his eyes with his hands, flustered. Unfortunately, his movement caused him to bump into the greatsword by his side, making it ring out. Chris' heart thumped, and he stood up abruptly. That instant, his gaze met with that of Minerva's. He saw her staring at him with her large, widened eyes.

The white robe that was in his hands fell onto the ground while he was still in a daze.

“W- Why youuuuuuuuuuuuu!”

He quickly turned around, but could clearly feel Minerva running over to grab her greatsword that she had placed by the pillar, causing him to cry out hurriedly in panic: “W- Wait a minute! It was an accident!”

“S- Shut up and get out, idiot!”

Chris was unceremoniously kicked out of the tent. When he turned around, he saw Minerva’s flushed face and her breasts exposed under her shoulders. Blazing fury and utter shame burned in her eyes while she had her greatsword raised high. As she realized that something was off, she quickly lowered the veil of the tent entrance, which blocked her from Chris’ view.

Chris knelt onto the ground and sighed heavily, as though he was expelling all of the fright he experienced. That moment, his eyes had stopped on Minerva’s elegant curves, and just couldn’t move away. In his mind, he couldn’t even help but feel awed by the beauty of Minerva’s body, making him feel ashamed of himself for having such a reaction.

— Oh no, I might have seriously angered her already.

— Even so……

Chris' calm composure returned when he touched the chilly ground and felt the solemn atmosphere of the soldiers in preparations for battle in the night.

— I have to ask her about it. Ask her about the emblem.

The veil at the entrance was raised once again. Minerva was clad in her usual battle garb, including the white robe. However, the emblem that Chris saw was concealed by her long red hair.

— But the emblem was indeed that of the Celestials.

"Chris, y- you- you fiend!"

Like a sign of an incoming storm, Minerva's red hair shook tremendously, shocking Chris into moving backwards continuously.

"S- Sorry, w- well, I was just staying in the tent coincidentally, and I hid myself in fright when you suddenly appeared, and then—"

“You had better not try that another time! I’ll gouge your eyeballs right out!”

Just after Minerva said that, and was about to walk away from Chris, he called her from behind.

“…… U- um…… I- I saw it……”

“No matter what you saw, just forget it! I- I…… had never once let men,”

“N- No, I’m not talking about seeing you naked.”

When he mentioned seeing her naked, Minerva turned around with a venomous glare, making him explain in agitation while waving his hands:

“Well, I was actually talking about that emblem that’s on the back of your robe.”

Minerva’s expression froze in an instant, the redness on her face abruptly swallowed by the darkness of the night, while the glow in her eyes dimmed, and was replaced by a shroud of darkness.

“…… You. Saw it, huh.”

She sounded agonized, as though she was shoving a dagger into her throat. Chris could only nod mutely.

"It's nothing. There is no need for you to know of this. Forget it. No matter what you saw just now, just forget it all."

After saying that, she bit her lip in force, turned around and was about to walk away with her red hair swaying.

"Ah, wait a minute!"

Chris subconsciously reached out to grab Minerva's wrist. She did not push him away, and instead met his gaze. Her eyes looked just like a lightless night sky of a new moon's night, startling Chris into silence.

— *She once said that she is going to eradicate the Celestials.*

Even if Chris' speculations were accurate, her motives still couldn't be explained.

— *Why……*

"…… Why?"

He could only force such simple words out of his mouth. His tongue had already dried up as he was contemplating how he should start the conversation, and was thus unable to clearly ask what he wanted to know.

With a desolate expression, Minerva averted her gaze. That moment, Chris noticed the meaning of her evasion in her eyes and continued: "Why…… What do you fight for?"

"…… I have already said this before…… I wish to eliminate the Celestials."

"Why? Do you hate the Celestials so much? And also, why were you targeted by the priests of Tuekay?"

"— Didn't I tell you to forget it! This is none of your business, and you don't need to know!"

"But I want to know!"

"Wha—"

Minerva's voice shook in her surprise. She gazed at Chris, her eyes gradually regaining their glimmer as the frost in them started to melt.

“I don’t even know what to do anymore. It was the same for that time, when I nearly let you get killed. I don’t want that anymore!”

Chris did not know whom he should protect Minerva from.

“Y- You—“ Minerva’s face approached that of Chris’, “ Don’t you forget that you are just a slave. You just need to devour the scenes of me being killed in my dreams!” She held Chris’ right hand and raised it before her chest. Her black, pearl-like eyes were soaked in tears, giving off a lustrous light.

“I don’t want to be a replacement of your mother. E-Even though you are my belonging, you always place yourself in the path of danger without regard for your own safety……”

“— That’s not it!”

Chris grabbed her hand forcefully as well. The halting words from his mouth caused a hint of confusion to surface in Minerva’s eyes.

“I didn’t! This is completely irrelevant to my mother!”

— Perhaps, at first…… I did indeed treat you as a replacement for my mother, but……

“This might just be my stubbornness…… But. But whenever I see you, I just feel sad. You cry when you are asleep, but smile when your face is stained in blood. I just don’t want to see you like this.”

— If that is your fate……

— If that is truly the case……

“Y- You—“

Minerva flung Chris’ hand away, her agitation so intense that even her ears looked red.

“Why must I listen to you talking about this—“

She turned around and bolted from the tent. Looking at her disappear gradually among the campfires, Chris could not bear to give chase himself.

— That’s right…… How can I say that I want to protect her?

— Even now, the omen that I am to kill her with my longsword has yet to disappear.

— The one making Minerva feel pain…… The one bestowing death upon Minerva…… might just be me.

From the moment night fell, Chris leant against the pillar in the tent, staring at the tip of his sword touching the ground as he held it.

“The sword won’t get sharp if you just look at it. Go get a whetstone and grind it.”

A voice rang out abruptly, startling Chris into rising from the pole while barely managing to hold on to the sword hilt in his hand. The shadow from the silhouette standing outside gradually extended towards Chris, and finally stopped by his feet. It was Gilberto.

“And also, clove oil must be applied on the sword body. A lot of it.”

“…… Ah, okay.”

Gilberto walked towards Chris when he heard his answer. Chris heard scattered sounds of metallic objects banging against each other from his feet. When he looked downwards, he saw in shock that Gilberto had piled up lightweight armor, a pair of shoulder armor, and a pair of wristguards that exposed the fingers.

“This…… This is?”

“Armor. Can’t you see?”

“I, this…… I know that it’s armor, but why……”

“Isn’t your armor still undergoing maintenance at Zaccariesco? I found some replacements of similar type and weight for you. After all, wearing unfamiliar armor in battle might cost you your life because of small mistakes.”

Chris couldn’t help but stare at Gilberto.

— *Why, why did he help me to this extent?*

“You aren’t acting as Lady Fran’s elite guard this time. It won’t affect her if you die, so just die if you want. But I ’m just lending that sword to you. Bring it back even if you die.”

Chris was about to protest that it was an unreasonable request, but then hurriedly stopped.

— He- he's actually trying to tell me to come back alive……

When he thought about it, Chris thought that he should just return Gilberto's sword to him. After all, Chris killed Minerva with that very sword in Minerva's vision.

— No, that would be pointless.

— Minerva once said fate that is set will surely come true, no matter in what form……

Chris thought that if he returned the longsword to Gilberto at that moment, though it was preposterous, the set destiny might propel Gilberto to pierce his longsword through Minerva's brows.

"These are painkillers and bandages for you to change. Your wounds heal quickly, but it's different for burns. I know that the wounds from fire arrows on your calves haven't healed yet. Don't just leave it."

"Ah, okay, fine."

Gilberto forced the medicine and bandages into his arms, making Chris' eyes widen in surprise. He couldn't react to Gilberto's sharp powers of observation.

Apart from that, Gilberto told Chris to block his ears when the assault team rammed the city door with the battering ram, and bind his mouth with cloth to prevent debris from the city door from entering his mouth. All of that caused him to be unable to speak.

"…… Thank you."

After a short daze, Chris finally remembered that he should thank him, and at the same time, returned the longsword to its scabbard and picked up the armor and bandages.

"No need to thank me. I'm not doing it for you. It's for the sword I lent you."

Gilberto stood up after saying that with his usual face devoid of expression. As he left, he muttered with his back to Chris: "And you won't be a beast forever, will you……"

Chris watched as the silhouette clad in black armor left , thinking to himself that he was truly a mysterious person…… Chris could not comprehend what Gilberto was thinking about. The set of armor that Gilberto found for him fit him very well. He was surprised that Gilberto knew his size, and speculated if Gilberto was able to guess so accurately by just looking.

— But Gilberto……

— Sorry, but I might not be able to return this sword to you …..

Chris decided, if he was unable to devour the death signs on Minerva, he would jump into the sea while holding the sword. Because there was probably no other way he could protect her apart from that.

— I never thought that I would actually think of protecting someone……

— I never thought…… that I would meet someone in this way as well……

In deep thought, he tied the longsword Gilberto lent to him on his waist and stood up from the ground.

Battering rams were originally tools made by tying tree trunks onto a cart, but in their evolution, eventually the cart and ram were made bigger and bigger, even spreading beast fur on the wood to prevent enemies from attacking with fire arrows, which was then replaced with eaves after further revision, almost turning the ram into a portable mini-fort.

Chris and Minerva stood between the shields erected at the two sides of the cart. Dawn was approaching, and it was only an hour from the agreed time.

Why must we be stationed at such a cramped place, Minerva predictably complained to Francesca. However ……

"Well, the reason I arranged for you to be at that position is for you to stay hidden from the view of the Celestial Army right until the last second."

The young, beautiful Captain proposed her idea:

"The best conditions for this plan are for you to dash into Santcarillon with both parties oblivious of what is happening, and when they finally realize it, we've already kidnapped the Archbishop, and are going to retreat. So, do not wait until daybreak to start the plan."

Under Francesca's arrangements, the hundred-man team from the Order taking part in the plan did not stay in the cramped space with Chris and Minerva. Instead, they were to dash inside after the city gate was brought down, just like any other sieges. Because of that, if the two elite guards were seen too early, the true intention of the strategy— to rescue the Archbishop from the surrounding Celestial Army— would be seen through. She said: *"Many people have long seen what the Salt Sprayer and the Star Eater looks like, after all."*

Apart from that, second and third groups of assassins targeting Minerva might have mixed into the enemy troops as well. Because of that, in the pitch-black conditions, Chris was to squat behind Minerva, waiting until dawn with their backs to each other in the cramped space filled with the smell of hot iron and burnt soot before appearing when they were needed.

Holding her greatsword in her lap, Minerva squatted with her back pressed on that of Chris', not saying one word. The pressure it caused on Chris was like a piece of lead heavily pressing on his heart.

— Never mind other things now, just focus on the mission …..

— The most important thing is for Minerva and I to survive in this assault plan.

The more he told himself that, the more he felt the warmth on his back. He could almost hear his thumping heartbeat. However, that might have just been the sounds of cartwheels rolling over pebbles as well.

"…… Chris."

A faint sound slashed through the silence of the night, causing Chris' back to freeze and straighten in fright.

It was Minerva's voice.

"…… W- What's the matter?" He forced out an answer in response.

"Don't turn around. Just listen to me like this."

Her words were like a nail that was hammered onto Chris' body, making him lower his slightly raised body once again.

"…… Fine."

"Do you really wish to know about me?"

Chris did not answer, but just nodded in response. The action was spread to Minerva through their backs closely pressed together.

"What do you plan to do even if you know? You are still unable to do anything, but that would increase the burden in your heart."

"But then, at least……"

Chris muttered while facing the longsword propped in front of him:

"At least the burden in your heart might just lighten a little."

After that, the sounds of moving cartwheels covered a long period of silence. Then, Chris heard Minerva speak in a faint voice after inhaling deeply:

"In my dream of you killing me…… I heard you mentioning your mother for quite a few times now. You said that she was killed right in front of you……"

Chris closed his eyes, allowing himself to sink into the fragmented voice behind him that was like snowflakes falling onto the ground.

— *If I am to take Minerva's life in the set destiny, why did I say all that to her?*

— *Was it because her image overlapped with that of my mother's in my heart as she lied in a pool of blood?*

However, it was fate that they had already changed, and thus Chris was never going to find out the answer.

"I am the same as you. I, too, saw my mother being killed before my very own eyes."

Chris held back his impulse to turn around, and waited for Minerva to continue her words.

"That wasn't an oracular dream. My mother was indeed killed before me. I saw my own father kill my mother with my very own eyes."

— *Minerva said so that time as well, that she was unable to save her mother as well……*

That moment, Chris could feel Minerva trembling from his back.

“Why did your father……”

Minerva continued to exhale chilly air after Chris’ question. Chris could feel her hesitating if she should continue her words.

“…… Our family has the bloodline of shrine maidens. We can only give birth to women, and looking from the perspective of raising children, their bodies are rather fragile. My oracular powers were inherited from my mother. It is a power passed on from generation to generation in my family, and has been inherited from a long, long time ago.”

Chris could sense that Minerva was pouring her heart out, resting the weight on her on his back.

“Mother told me that this power exists to protect the women in our family from disasters…… It will predict the process and pain of our death so that we can avoid our fate of dying.”

— The power to protect Minerva and her family from disaster……

— The power to be rid of misfortune……

“Originally, we could only see the death signs that would happen on us. However, after the masses found out about our powers, they gathered by our side to use it, and at the same time thought of many ways to change our power. For instance, they found a way for us to predict the most suitable man to marry for us to bear children……”

“— Marry…… How could this be done?”

“That was why my father killed my mother……”

Chris could not comprehend the meaning of Minerva’s words, and thus his mind worked in frenzy. At the moment when he was about to ask directly, he suddenly thought of a plausible explanation, and thus couldn’t help but gulp.

— If the women in Minerva’s family can only see their own deaths……

— Then if there is a rule that allows their husbands to kill their own wives……

— If so, the conditions of the women in Minerva's family predicting their own deaths— predicting which man was to be their killer, would be met……

Chris couldn't help but raise his hand to cover his mouth— It was a terrifying idea. It was just too twisted. Such a rule shouldn't have been enacted……

"They often used the power of our family just like that. And for us to be able to see the future more clearly, they often used on us medication that could increase sensitivity to pain. I was forced to drink it quite a few times as well. Instead of that— Instead of doing that…… "

Unconsciously, Chris' hand that was not on his mouth was already gripping Minerva's palm, while the fingers clasped on his palm were tightly clenched on his flesh.

Enough, no need to say anything more…… Chris wanted to stop her, but he couldn't make any noise.

"Instead of that, dying would be a better option…… After that, we were brought to various places to predict wars and calamities. Just like that, my mother, mother's mother, and mother's mother's mother…… All of the women in my family were worshipped as Goddesses."

Worshipped as Goddesses— Chris knew what deity Minerva was referring to: The goddess manipulating fate , symbolized by an emblem of a winged wheel. Tuekay.

“When a female is born to females of our family, the mother would be killed by the husband, allowing the daughter to inherit our ancestral power. This nation was built upon this cycle of murders. And I, I was actually supposed to inherit this tradition……”

— *That’s right, then why would Minerva be here?*

“But I ran away.”

Deep sorrow could be hear in Minerva’s voice. The greatsword placed horizontally by her side shook.

“I, alone, escaped…… Leaving my sister, whose powers are far inferior to me, and fled. While she, Silvia — she became my replacement!”

Minerva shouted as though trying to release from her throat all of the tears that she was holding back:

“She was immersed in medication from head to toe, and was in an abyss of pain even when her eyes were open…… She will soon be forced to marry, bear children and then get killed. All of that is for the sake of this country…… I definitely…… definitely won't allow something like this to happen……"

Chris could feel Minerva's agitation from the hand that he was holding.

"I definitely won't allow this to happen— Unforgivable…… The whole Celestial Kingdom is unforgivable! I will burn it all down to ashes! I will prevent this twisted cycle from going on— I am going to sever the bloodline of the Celestials!"

That moment, Chris felt the warmth from Minerva's hand fade gradually.

— To exterminate the Celestials, the meaning to those words were……

"Before that, I cannot die."

Chris replayed Minerva's words in his mind.

I am going to end the bloodline of my kin. Before that, I definitely won't lose my life easily— All along, whenever the crimson radiance of death so beautiful that it made one unable to turn away was shone upon Minerva, she would repeat those words in her heart again and again.

— That means…… Minerva……

That instant, Minerva raised her head abruptly as she sensed something wrong. Loud noise started ringing in the surrounding darkness. The sound of the battering ram cart moving over sand, the whistle of arrows soaring in the sky, the sound of crackling flames and war cries of soldiers. The assault unit of the Order had started their attack. With a bang, the cart slanted and dashed forward through momentum. Because of the dash, Minerva and Chris nearly fell onto the wooden floorboards of the cart. In the next instant, the impact of the battering ram ramming heavily on the door mercilessly shook them.

"Stop! Return the battering ram, hurry!"

Riding on her steed, Francesca hurried down from the hill where the city door loomed, shouting at the captain of the hundred-man assault unit with the supporting archery unit in a formation behind her.

“What? Stop? Are you telling us to give up on the mission?”

“Yes! Hurry!”

“No! Lady Fran!”

Giving chase on horseback from behind, Gilberto arrived with a loud cry. That moment, a tremendous sound suddenly rang at the battlefield where flaming arrows crossed like the rain. Under the sky that was gradually lightening at dawn, the outline of the city door that looked faded under the dark rays of light gradually grew clearer, at the same time exposing its irregularly inclined angle— the city door had been brought down. The assault team started their attack on the city.

“If we retreat at this time, we will be trapped in a pincer attack by the Celestial Army from two sides!”

“Blast……”

At that point, Francesca realized as well, that she had lost her usual calm decisiveness.

(What do we do if it can't be stopped? Use the whole unit so that the assault unit can retreat?)

(No, it's better to break the floodgates after confirming that the Allied Army started taking action— Wait, no, it's too early for that!)

(Then should we patch up the problem by pretending to take the enemy's battering ram, faking an attack to make time for the assault unit to retreat?)

She thought at whirlwind speed, of all possible ways to solve the problem, and dismissed all unsuitable options.

"E- Excuse me……" At a side, Paola asked timidly: " Why do we need to abort the operation all of a sudden? Did something happen? The Celestial Army is in a mess right now, and we've brought down the city gate as well. Now, we only need to wait for Meena and Chris to complete their mission, isn't that right?"

As Paola said, Francesca's battle plan was proceeding smoothly. When Zaccaria's Order of the Silver Egg took aim at the city gate of Medoccia, that was supposed to be a member of the Princinopolis Alliance as well, the

Celestial Army fell into disorder. After all, it was neither an attack on them, nor an attempt to escape. As the Celestial Army headed sluggishly towards the East Gate, they were instead ambushed with an arrow rain from behind by the prided archery unit of the Order, exacerbating the confusion of the situation. That moment , the city gate had been brought down. Apart from Francesca's only miscalculation, every aspect of the battle plan was executed perfectly.

(Why didn't I realize this earlier!)

Francesca gritted her teeth and urged her subordinates to request for backup from the Allied Army.

There was already a sign for the miscalculation. The reason of the Celestial Army's sluggishness was due to the absence of their commander. However, it was already too late by the time Francesca realized it.

"Paola, I will enter the city if necessary. I will not allow my subordinates to die because of my miscalculation!"

"— Miscalculation? You are referring to?"

"The location of negotiation between Medoccia and the Celestial Kingdom is in the city of Santcarillon. I never thought that that man would actually sneak into enemy territory alone, staying in there after that as well ……"

"That man is……"

"It's Cornelius!"

The room Medoccia arranged for Cornelius was located at the top floor of the Santcarillon Castle. Pushing away the curtains, he saw an image of confusion in the courtyard. That moment, not only the troops of the Order of the Silver Egg were in Santcarillon, but the Celestial Army and the Allied Army as well, resulting in chaotic battle.

(It's the girl from Zaccaria, huh? Decisive, as always……)

After changing, Cornelius adjusted his collar after confirming the objects on his waists, a wry smile on his face.

"My lord, according to reports, the rebels' target seems to be the room of the Archbishop of Palkai."

The voice of a guard rang from outside.

“Got it. I’ll go there right away.”

After answering Cornelius glanced at the dark bedroom.

Ignoring the objections of the other people, he had brought four guards into the city for negotiations with Medoccia. The reason he stayed was to reassure the Duke of Medoccia. However, things were different now that it turned out this way.

Walking to the end of the corridor, Cornelius looked around at the guards by his side. With a hand gesture, he told them that he alone would suffice in getting things done.

“Say, you’ve confirmed that there’s a red-haired girl among the assault unit, is that right?”

“I saw it with my own eyes. She is probably the Salt Sprayer. She is very experienced in battling.”

The oldest among the guards answered. Cornelius was satisfied with his answer, and set out without a further word.

"And also, My lord. The beast's son is in the same unit as her as well."

Cornelius couldn't help but laugh out loud at the guards' addition to their report.

(I see now. The so-called fate is truly smiling on me, Chosen One of the gods. Is the meeting this time predestined as well?)

Cornelius already knew that the Duke of Medoccia would not hand the Archbishop over to him so easily, but he had already found out the location where he was hidden. However, since the situation turned out like this, the Archbishop didn't even matter anymore. Cornelius even ordered his guards not to stop the Order from taking him away. After all, if they were to escape with the Archbishop, their chosen routes of escape would be largely limited.

Cornelius turned into the entrance of a high tower at the end of the corridor, and ran down the spiraling stairway made of stone bricks. From the stairway, he could hear footfalls from another group of men.

(As I had expected.)

From the platform of the stairway, he turned into the stone arch entrance of a bridge connecting the two towers. Countless footsteps stopped together at that moment. Even the footfalls of his guards behind him vanished on that moment as well.

“Well done.”

Cornelius pulled out his sword as his lip curled.

Tens of young knights blocked the pathway before Cornelius. Among the armored knights, Cornelius could see the silhouette of the Archbishop’s yellow robe. However, his gaze did not stop on that person, because what he was more concerned of was the red-haired silhouette that was still extremely visible under the faded light.

Chris could clearly see fear from Minerva’s face as she stood beside him. He gripped the sword hilt in his hands, focusing on the man standing at a lower position of the arch-shaped corridor. Indeed. It was the general he saw that time, Cornelius, the Consort Prospect. Chris had no time to think of the reason he was in the castle so early in the morning. That moment, Minerva finally snapped out of her terror, and shouted at the other members of the Order:

“Retreat! Hurry up and take the Archbishop away! Leave two units to defend against them!”

Chris heard the obese Archbishop squawk for a moment, and then a unit of ten could be heard sprinting away along with the Archbishop.

That moment, Cornelius moved his body slowly, but then disappeared from his original position in the next instant—

“Wha—!” “Mn? Ah?” “T- This guy!” “Uwaah!”

The knights blocking the corridor in a line wailed at the same time. Broken blades flipped to the ceiling, while blood spilled onto the stone steps and clanking friction of armor parts rang out, fusing into an unbelievable scene. With just a few light touches on the enemies before him with his long sword body, Cornelius effortlessly toppled a few of the elite members of the Order.

Cornelius did not kill them. The limbs of the knights of the Order sprawled on the ground were still trembling slightly. With their eyes wide open, they were actually still conscious as well. *It's the skill that I saw that time,* Chris realized as the muscles on his shoulders froze up.

The four guards who were standing behind Cornelius quickly dashed forward to surround their liege lord, occupying the space where the tens of fallen knights were originally standing. Minerva lowered her body and raised her greatsword in a stance, glaring at Cornelius with her guard up, unmoving.

"My lord, the Archbishop has—"

One of the guards spoke to his liege lord while his gaze was fixed on the knights.

"Never mind him now. Right now, Her Majesty is more important."

Cornelius answered his subordinate with a chilling cackle, and then fixed his eyes as cold as metal on Minerva.

Her Majesty— Cornelius did indeed say that. Chris and the knights standing by his side could all hear it clearly. They probably noticed the effect of those words on Minerva as well.

“It’s been a while, Your Majesty. The last time I saw you was probably at an age when I was still not allowed to have a sword.”

One step after another, even unhesitatingly stepping on the bodies of the knights sprawled on the ground, Cornelius slowly approached Minerva. Chris raised the tip of his sword to eye-height, and stood before her, as though to protect Minerva.

“Lady Silvia said that she wishes to see you, since she often saw Your Majesty’s silhouette these days.”

“Shut up…… I don’t even know you!”

“How can you say that you don’t know me, the one who might be your husband?”

Cornelius’ chilly tone sounded rather joyous. His words caused the knights who were still standing to look back at their comrade— Minerva, while breaking into whispers. Chris suddenly felt the pain of a thousand blades on his heart, feeling a dark impulse form in his heart, making him feel like biting everyone apart from Minerva to death.

“In contrast to Lady Silvia, Your Majesty is able to see the future without medication, isn’t that right?”

Hearing Cornelius’ words, Chris saw Minerva raising her greatsword from the corner of his eyes, the tip of the blade reflecting the luster of metal.

“You swine, what did you do to Silvia!”

The instant he saw the red hair swaying, Chris’ consciousness was completely taken over by the flash of red. The blood in his body boiled like molten iron, occupying each corner in his body, propelling him to dash forward unconsciously. A beast-like roar escaped from his mouth as he jumped across the fallen knights of the Order, darting directly towards Cornelius. However, the guards guarding Cornelius hurriedly raised their swords and rushed over to him as well.

“— AAAHHHHHHHHHHHH!”

The instant blades were withdrawn from their scabbards, a fatal sound rang out from the impact of hard metal, flesh and bone breaking together, and reverberated on the stone connective bridge. Splattered blood stained Chris’ cheeks. Cornelius’ four guards who were without armor had their wrists, arms and abdomens torn apart at the same time, falling by Chris' sides in pieces. He, on the other hand, lunged at Cornelius along the momentum from the slash. Against the powerful strike, even Cornelius couldn't help but back away a few steps, blocking the attack with his slender longsword.

As Chris fell onto the ground, he unhesitatingly pierced through the stone corridor floor with his longsword. If not for Cornelius' quick movements, the Consort Prospect would probably have been sliced into two. Chris wiped away the blood on the sword as he screeched.

"Ho, a battlefield of that extent was indeed not enough to kill you, beast's son!"

A smile surfaced on Cornelius' face. Under his gaze, Chris finally noticed that his brands were stinging due to the scorching heat they were giving off.

"I am extremely pleased. You are a supporting character that cannot be absent in my life, after all.

Because—“ Cornelius raised the slender blade to eye level, a petrifyingly twisted expression appearing on his face: “Because you must be the filthiest one of them all.”

“Wha—“

Just ignore him, don’t listen to whatever rubbish he is spouting. Chris resisted his urge to retort and forcefully kicked on the stone floor.

That moment—

“Chris, the one who should take his life is MEEEEEEEE!””

A voice rang behind him, and at the same time, red flames dashed past Chris. In the next instant, metallic luster of a blade swung at Cornelius’ skull in an arc. The high-pitched sound of a metallic collision rang. With his slender sword, Cornelius brushed the attack from Minerva’s greatsword away, changing the path of the arc to cut the stone floor. Minerva pulled her greatsword and turned around to retaliate, but her attack was again deflected by Cornelius’ sword.

The force of Minerva’s greatsword caused Chris to be unable to approach. However, the pulses of his brands on his forehead and the back of his hand continued to aggravate his nerves.

— What is wrong with this man.

— From where does he get his power? Actually being able to deflect Minerva's greatsword so easily……

That instant, Chris noticed something off— similar to him, the back of Cornelius' right had was emitting a pale radiance as well.

"…… Blast!"

Cornelius flicked away Minerva and her greatsword with his attack. Before she fell onto the stone floor, Chris reflexively caught her. He bent his knees to pick up Minerva's slender body, and raised his head to shift his attention towards the young Consort Prospect.

The radiance on his hand was from an insignia grander than the one on Chris' hands.

— It can't be mistaken now, it's a brand.

"What, do you feel surprised?"

As he spoke, Cornelius raised his longsword before him, showing off the glowing brand on the back of his hand to Chris.

"Have you never thought that if there can be a filthy, cursed brand on you, there might be another with a brand signifying fortune in this world?"

From Cornelius' mocking words, Chris could feel terror that almost tore his body apart.

— *Who. Who is this guy……*

— *And who, am I?*

"…… Ngh……"

That moment, Minerva struggled while moaning, trying to break free from Chris. She gripped the greatsword in her hand and was planning to stand up. Meanwhile, Chris saw the same brand on Cornelius' left hand glowing like pulses of blood, making him feel a chilling cold on his spine all of a sudden. When he turned around in unease, the scene he saw almost made him loosen his longsword.

The knights of the Order who were originally lying on the ground had stood up, surrounding the kneeling Chris and Minerva. Their arms holding their blades were twisted in an abnormal angle, while their harried footsteps were like that of drunken men.

— Is it possible!

“S- Stop!” “W- What’s wrong with this……” “B- Blast ……”

That moment, every one of them were still conscious, but it was as if their bodies couldn’t be controlled by their own thoughts……

All of a sudden, Chris saw one of the knights swinging his sword at them. Chris reflexively grabbed Minerva and rolled on the ground. Instantly, sparks appeared at the place where they were previously squatting.

“Hey, wake up! They’re our comrades!” “Don’t come closer to me!” “Have you gone crazy!”

Among the clashing blades, the knights of the Order continued to call out in shock. Minerva stood up from the ground first, while Chris could only stand up after a coughing fit as his back had rammed onto the wall. On the other hand, the knights who were not attacked by Cornelius blocked the attacks of their comrades, backing away while crying out.

“Stop it— Blast!” “Damn it!” “Meena! Run away!”

As the three knights raised their blades against Minerva, they shouted warnings at Minerva as well. It was painful to hear them. Minerva painstakingly shielded herself by blocking herself with the greatsword.

“Y- You guys, what’s wrong—!”

“I- I don’t know! My body’s moving by itself!” “Meena , just run away without us already, if not—“

Minerva blocked the blades that were swung at her, but was still forced to the walls by her comrades. That moment, Cornelius’ laughter floated over from the knights’ backs: “Now you understand. This is my power. The power of one who is chosen by the deity of fortune!”

“Cornelius, you swine—!”

Minerva gritted her teeth and dashed forward, but was caught by Chris. Leaning against the stone wall, he searched for a route of retreat. However, their comrades continued to attack swing after swing, continually targeting their limbs. To shield Minerva from behind, he was slashed on the shoulder and the thigh, and cried out in pain.

“Just don’t harm his eyes and voice. Attack his limbs as much as you please!”

Under Cornelius’ orders, the knights he controlled bled as they painfully gnashed their teeth, but were unable to stop themselves from slowly approaching their comrades. That moment, the brand on Chris’ forehead finally exploded in scorching pain. At the same time, calls of the beast in his body started to resound in his mind—

(Devour!)

(Devour!)

(Devour them all!)

A blade was thrust at Chris’ throat. He caught it with his left hand. The tip of the blade pierced through his palm, at the same time pricking the center of the insignia on his forehead. The brand shone with a white light in the trail of blood as the blood trickled into Chris’ eyes, dying his vision bright red.

“—AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!”

Chris howled. In that instant, that sound was already not that of his own consciousness— not one that a human would make. As he viciously swung down his right arm, the air resistance made him feel as though he was slashing through cloth. With his attack, a pair of arms was severed along with their armor, and flew into the wall. Blood of his adversary dyed Chris’ vision a more brilliant red, and at the same time completely covered his consciousness. After that, he thrust his sword at the throat of a comrade who looked as though he was begging for something in his terror, and the same time dashed at other people while using the dead body still on the sword as a shield. The blade drew out an arc in mid-air, even springing severed heads to the ceiling. Bodies detached from the connecting point of the armor at the waist rolled on the ground, streaming out copious amounts of blood, dying the floor bright crimson.

Sounds of people calling Chris filled the corridor, but nobody could stop him anymore. Calling the scene a massacre might not even be appropriate anymore— it was fruitful harvest. Pieces of flesh piled up by Chris' feet. Cornelius' shrill laughter irritated their eardrums as it resounded.

"— Chris, stop! Chris—!"

The voice of a girl continued to call the same name like a heavy bell. However, the voice was easily drowned out of his consciousness as Chris continued to sink in the feeling of cutting human flesh. The voice of the beast in him had completely fused with the roars made by Chris.

When the wailings in Chris' heart vanished completely , he was already in a sea of blood.

— How nostalgic.

The first thing that surfaced in his mind was actually such hideous longing. With his feet sinking in warmth, was that not a scene that he was always searching for after losing it once before? With all those corpses and skulls surrounding him, was that not the place that he belongs to?

There was still someone alive. Not only did the knights who lost an arm or an eye seem to have lost their freedom after being attacked by the demon sword, they couldn't even feel the pain from their body anymore. From pools of blood, they grabbed swords and clambered towards Chris.

"Chris! Y- You—!"

Minerva's voice pierced through Chris' eardrums.

"Don't look at me!" Chris shouted at Minerva without even turning back: "Don't look at me. I'm a……"

— I killed my own comrades……

— True to the curse of the Star Eater, I attacked my own comrades……

"Hurry up and run, never mind me—"

Chris shouted to Minerva. Holding his slender sword, a cold smile surfaced on Cornelius' face. Chris stared at him. That moment, countless footsteps and calls resounded from the stairway behind Cornelius: “My Lord!” “Are you okay!”

“Chris! You idiot!”

“Meena! Stop! It’s about time for us to retreat!” “Do you have a death wish!” “He can’t be saved anymore! Give up already!”

“Let go of me!” Minerva struggled among her comrades, “Chris! You, stop messing with me! How can you, all by yourself…… Chris!”

Chris was already unable to hear Minerva’s calls. With tears and blood in his eyes, a soundless wail escaped from his mouth as he dashed at his surrounding comrades, killing them as easily as one plucking wings off small insects. He stepped over their corpses and lunged at Cornelius. The young Consort Prospect blocked Chris’ attacks one after another in his cackels.

“You look beautiful only in this way, Beast’s son!”

Soldiers of the Celestial Army appeared on the stone connective bridge. Chris’ limbs were attacked by their spears, and he fell in a pool of blood. A boot stamped on the back of his hand wielding his sword. The beast’s lust for slaughter seemed to have been sated, and thus faded little by little from Chris' body. Lying in the pool of blood, he heard Minerva's wails gradually fade along with countless footsteps.

"How does the blood of your comrades taste?"

Cornelius' voice rang from above.

"I have already said this, your life is one of you struggling all alone, and then dying without anyone by your side. This is the way a beast dies, a fate that you can never go against."

Chris raised his head, but was unable to see anything due to the blood blocking his sight.

However, he understood that it was his destiny, destiny of the Beast. He would be all alone, dying alone in the wilderness while avoiding encounters with other people.

Even so, when people surrounding the campfire invited him to come closer, he naively accepted their invitation and approached the campfire with human warmth, trying to twist the fate he was shouldering. Hence, he got what he deserved. He had to kill his comrades with his very own hands— before Minerva’s eyes.

Chris closed his eyes, burying his lips that were trying to speak into a warm sea of blood with the taste of rust.

— *Did Minerva run away safely, I wonder.*

— *Running away to a place where I can no longer find her ……*

— *Would she just forget me like this as well, killing me off in her heart……*

— *If only that time……*

— *If only she had killed me that time, how great would that have been……*

At last, a black mire gradually enveloped Chris’ consciousness, pulling him into an abyss of darkness.

Chapter 10 – New Moon

It was one night before new moon. The Celestial Army had captured Santcarillon, allowing their troops of ten thousand men to enter the city. The citizens of Medoccia scattered flowers over the streets adorned with bells, enthusiastically welcoming the arrival of the awe-inspiring honor guards donning the emblem of a winged wheel. The crowd's exhilaration was pushed to the max when a large, elaborate palanquin passed by after the honor guards.

After Francesca and the Order of the Silver Egg retreated from Santcarillon, they stopped temporarily at the small town of Epabella along with the other members of the Allied Army. And at that moment, the fanfare from Santcarillon could be heard even in the campsite.

"It seems like the citizens of Medoccia have already half-abandoned their Duke."

Sitting by the window, Nicolo raised the curtains and mumbled as he gazed at the outline of Santcarillon, handing his telescope to Francesca right after that.

Francesca raised the telescope. When she saw the purple flags waving on the city walls, she sighed and tossed the telescope back to the military doctor, who then said:

“Even if Her Majesty arrives, I’m not sure if they can truly forget the nightmares of the heavy taxes and unreasonable military recruitment system imposed upon them by the Duke of Medoccia.”

“If Medoccia becomes territory of the Queen, the taxes on the citizens will decrease. Such rumors had long spread far and near.”

Francesca shrugged. Of course, such news was just baseless hearsay. In fact, no matter if the Celestial Kingdom would reassign them a representative governor or select an easily manipulated successor after retiring the current Duke, it would make no difference, it was highly probable that Santcarillon would maintain its current system.

“But speaking of which, it’s probably the first time in history for the Weneralia Festival to be celebrated in a city apart from the capital.”

It was five days before when Santcarillon was seized by the troops of the Celestial Kingdom. Francesca proposed to the Allied Army to leave the Duke of Medoccia while the troops of each nation were to retreat directly. Using her merits for saving the Archbishop, Francesca forced the commanders of the other five nations to give in. After all, if even the Duke of Medoccia escaped from his own city, the citizens would completely devote themselves to the nobles of the Celestial Kingdom .

However, even Francesca never thought that the Queen would actually arrive at the city of Santcarillon.

"Won't the people from Santuario be annoyed if the wedding is held in Santcarillon? Gahahahaha!"

Not long before, the Queen had already declared an Oracle Decree by Tuekay, proclaiming Consort Prospect Cornelius as her Royal Consort, the Queen's husband-to-be. However, only three days separated the arrival of news of the Oracle Decree at the city of Santcarillon and the Queen's arrival, meaning that the Queen departed for Santcarillon right after the proclamation of Tuekay's Oracle Decree.

(Why did they suddenly change the tradition, holding the wedding ceremony at Santcarillon?)

With her arms crossed, Francesca gazed upon the majestic outline of Santcarillon under the setting sun. She judged that it was due to the fact that Cornelius could not leave the city.

(Is he trying to lure someone out? But then, who is his target?)

She turned around to look at the room lacking in sunshine. Part from Nicolo, she had nearly forgotten the presence of another person there— Minerva. That moment, Minerva was still clad in her battle robes, squatting in a corner while holding her greatsword in her arms. Perceiving Francesca's gaze, she immediately raised her head and asked, the ink-black circles around her eyes making her look like a panda:

"…… Why didn't you attack them while they were still on their journey?"

Francesca sighed, "That won't do. How can we launch an attack on the troops protecting the Queen without being noticed by the soldiers stationed in the city of Santcarillon? Besides, we won't be able to obtain the assistance of the Allied Army either."

“This war will end the moment you kill the Queen. Why didn’t you grit your teeth and just do it!”

“Yes, it might be the end to you. However, our battle will still continue. You know that, don’t you?”

Hearing that, Minerva puffed out her cheeks and turned away, standing up from the ground after that.

“It’s not like we can’t attack. But if we announce your circumstances to the world, telling the whole Allied Army that the current Queen of the Celestial Kingdom is a fake, declaring war upon the Celestial Kingdom with the flag of a winged wheel, that would indeed be useful, but do you think that the situation will change then?”

Leaning against her sword, Minerva stood mutely without moving as she supported her weight on the sword hilt. She bit her lip, biting it until her lips turned white.

In the campsite of the Allied Army, there was hardly anyone who knew Minerva’s true identity. Even in the Order of the Silver Egg, only Francesca, a few of the elite guards and Nicolo knew it. Francesca's grandfather was in the know, but her father, the current Duke of Zaccaria never heard of that matter before.

Francesca thought that, judging from the current situation, there might even be more people in the Celestial Army who knew of this. After all, rumors of the legendary swordsman, the Salt Sprayer, had most probably spread into the ears of the Celestials, and as long as they listened to the descriptions from the rumors, they would be able to discern that the person was Minerva.

The Celestial Kingdom had absolutely no need to hide Minerva's identity. In fact, the ones truly afraid of the news being revealed were just the Celestials, but Francesca thought she definitely could not allow the countries of the East to know of Minerva's identity.

They could indeed solidify the Seven Countries' military forces in Minerva's name. However, if they did obtain victory, what would be left over would still be a group of nobles worshipping their Queen. They would still fight to monopolize the power of the Divine, and in the end, nothing would have changed.

(We have no other choice but to end this war with our own power, and not in the name of the divine.)

That was what Francesca thought.

"…… So we still need time to unite the Alliance, huh."

"Are you saying that the other nations are all scaredy-cats! Right now, the maintenance of Santcarillon' s East Gate has yet to be completed, while the city is in a mess because of wedding preparations. Isn't this the best chance for us to attack!"

"Yes, that's right. They're all scaredy-cats. After all, after the Weneralia Festival, more than half of the forces of the Celestial Army will be switched back to Santuario, so there are quite a number of people saying that we should first return to our respective countries to reform."

Hearing Francesca's statement, Minerva hammered her fist on the wooden pole, "What a joke! If we wait until the wedding ceremony is over, Silvia will…… The lizard-like person will……"

With a pitying expression, Francesca gazed at the Queen's elder sister as her shoulders trembled continually in anxiety.

After the marriage between the Queen and her spouse, they had to give birth to children. Minerva was supposed to be the one to bear that pain.

“…… Very well, I understand.” After saying that, Minerva hoisted her greatsword up and walked towards the entrance.

“Are you planning to attack all by yourself?”

Francesca asked coldly, while Nicolo’s eyes widened at her question.

Minerva did not turn back, “Why do you ask when you already know?”

“H- Hey, wait just a bit. There must be other ways to do this, you’re just going to your death if you go alone!” Nicolo exclaimed.

“Chris is still there all alone, but I…… But I— I ran away all by myself!”

As Minerva turned around to glare at Nicolo, her flaming red hair swung in an arc behind her. The pure power of her gaze made Nicolo back away to the window in fright, "…… That…… isn't your responsibility…… is it?"

"It's not a matter of responsibility! Chris is my belonging! He is going to— My fate, he will—"

"So you are going to chase him to death? You fool!"

"Chris won't die—!"

Not only did it shock Nicolo, even Francesca couldn't help but inhale sharply at Minerva's cry.

After hearing reports from the tens of survivors of the assault unit that included Minerva, even Francesca felt despair. No matter who they were, they would turn into Cornelius' puppets if they touched his demon sword. Although such a mystical power was hard to believe in, there was no other alternative when she heard her subordinates speaking of their experience of having their comrades raising their swords on them. Apart from that, the reports pointed out that Chris killed all of those who were manipulated by Cornelius' demon sword, and was then skewered to the ground with spears by soldiers of the Celestial Army who reached just then. Currently, no one who knew of that thought Chris had any chance of surviving.

“I saw it…… The death prophecy of him piercing through my brow with his sword has yet to disappear! So he must still be alive!”

After saying that, Minerva turned around and exited the room, closing the door along the way. Francesca and Nicolo then heard heavy footfalls on the stairs.

(She saw the same vision as before, huh…… If so, this is indeed proof of Chris’ survival.)

“…… That guy…… is still alive?”

Nicolo muttered with a look of disbelief, then turned abruptly to say to Francesca: “Captain…… T- Then, Meena will really head into Santcarillon all by herself! We must stop her!”

“I have already told Gilberto to keep guard over her since we don’t know what Meena will do.”

Hearing her words, Nicolo scratched his head and sighed: “Even though Meena didn’t do anything these few days…… In the end, she turned out like this as soon as she found out that that guy is still alive. I find that she resembles a battering ram, only being able to see the small distance between it and the city gate, only knowing how to dash forward……"

Disregarding his sharp words, Francesca sank into deep thought.

Chris is alive. He might have been imprisoned. But why?

Why did Cornelius allow Chris to live on?

(Chris. Who…… Who in the world is he?)

(That's right. The key to all of the questions is pointing towards that……)

All of a sudden, hurried footsteps pulled Francesca from her troubles back to her dark room.

"Lady Fran, is it true that Chris is still alive!"

It was Paola. She seemed to have just changed into her blue medic robes, as her hat and hair looked especially ruffled, probably since she had not the time to tidy it up yet.

"How did you know?"

"I- I heard it. I- Is it true! Is, is Chris truly alive!"

"The walls of this building are horrendously thin…… Should I request for a change in room?"

Francesca patted Paola's shoulders, as she seemed extremely out of breath, hurrying over in her excitement. She sighed: "Yes, he appeared in a future that Meena foresaw…… She said that he is still alive."

"T- T- Then, let's hurry up and save him. After all, Chris is very important to Minerva!"

Hearing Paola's opinion, Francesca couldn't help but stare at her with her eyes wide. Meanwhile, Paola's eyes widened as well when she saw her liege lord's surprise.

(Save him? Chris?)

Francesca blankly took two steps back and sat down on the chair.

Save him? But how? Francesca was horrified that she was actually thinking of possible methods to save him.

(Impossible. It's no good, we'll have to let him be.)

(Santcarillon has already been captured. It’s impossible for the Order of the Silver Egg to do anything alone……)

It was at that moment when Gilberto entered the room with blood dripping from his face.

“Gilberto! W- Why are you hurt!”

Paola paled when she saw him, and hurriedly scuttled to his side. However, Gilberto brushed her aside and knelt before Francesca as she approached.

“My deepest apologies, Lady Fran.”

Gilberto’s few words were enough for Francesca to understand everything.

“…… So you weren’t able to stop her?”

“Yes. I knew in one strike that my sword was unable to block her path.”

Hanging his head, the blood on Gilberto’s forehead dripped onto the floorboard. It might have been fortunate that Gilberto was the one who faced Minerva, as other people might not be able to escape with just a small wound.

“She told me that if I blocked her path, she was going to Santcarillon even if she needed to kill me, so I let her go. I thought that I should first report this to you and await further instructions.”

“Gil, I’m really thankful that you can make calm decisions each and every time.”

Francesca rested her hand on the shoulder of the captain of her elite guards, asking him to stand up. With a piece of cloth, she wiped away the blood on Gilberto’s forehead and asked Paola to take care of his wound.

“Captain, what should we do? I think I can help out if I’m assigned in the feint unit.”

“Nicolo, didn’t you just say that we should stop her?” Francesca asked instead.

“I said, we should stop her from going in by herself. But if by any chance you thought of a great tactic and gave us the order, Meena won’t be going in by herself then.” The military doctor smiled pleasantly after saying that.

Francesca raised her head to look at the ceiling.

It's impossible. We can only leave Chris there to die. She shook her head. However, when her gaze met with those of Paola, Gilberto and Nicolo's, an inexplicable emotion surged in her heart.

(What should we do……?)

With his cheeks pressed on the cold stone floor, Chris heard footsteps coming from the outside.

He raised his head in the darkness and looked at the flames shining in from outside the steel bars. The brilliant light made him cover his eyes. He already forgot how many days before was the last time his eyes saw light. Already used to the darkness, his eyes were aggravated, causing his eyelids to spasm, while tears formed at the corners of his eyes as well.

"…… Who's there…… Isn't it about time to sentence me to death already?"

Opening his eyes slightly, he looked outside the bars between his fingers. His lips were cracked, throat parched. Whenever he spoke, it would cause pain as though a rusted steel baton being swirled in his throat.

There was not only one light source, but three— no, there were even more. A large crowd stood outside Chris ’ gaol. From their shadows, metallic smell, footsteps and other traits, he judged that they were soldiers in full armor.

“Come closer, Beast’s son.”

He recognized the voice. Chris’ throat convulsed like a fish out of water struggling before its death. His eyes gradually got used to the illumination before him. He fixed his gaze upon the source of the voice, and a tall man dressed in luxurious clothing and accessories gradually came into his view. Although there was a smile on the man’s face, his bead-like pupils chilled one even more than the stone walls of the prison.

“Cornelius……”

“Do not taint my name with your filthy mouth. After all, I am one who is going to accept the ultimate blessing not long after this. It will best for you to remain silent, and just crawl over to a place where the oil lamps can reach your face.”

— The ultimate blessing, he said?

— What is that? What is this guy talking about?

— A person like you should be eternally damned instead.

With his five fingers, Chris clawed on the stone floor, and slowly crawled to the steel bars. Apart from Cornelius' long sleeves, the scabbard of his slender, terrifying longsword could be seen as well. Apart from that, he saw quite a few pairs of legs behind Cornelius as well, probably his guards. Each of them had on the same military boots except for one who stood beside Cornelius .

Resisting the pain from his collarbone, Chris frowned as he raised his gaze.

The owner of the legs was a girl. She had long, red hair , and there was a silver crown on her forehead. The opulent dress she was wearing was tinted a faint orange under the illumination of the oil lamps. Hanging at the two sides of the dress, the pure white sleeves looked like a pair of open wings.

The most striking feature of the girl was her black eyes .

Chris knew it the moment he saw it. The timid, youthful face reminded him of another person.

“Let Her Majesty look at your face.” Cornelius said coolly to Chris.

Her Majesty— the Sibyl Queen who controlled the Celestials and the shrine maidens serving Tuekay.

“…… This is the man, isn’t that right, Lady Silvia.”

“Yes, this is the one.”

“This was the blade he was holding, correct?”

While speaking, Cornelius took a longsword from a guard behind him and raised it before the Queen. With a sword body as smooth as a mirror, it was unquestionable that it was the sword that Gilberto lent to Chris.

The Queen’s chin shook uncontrollably as she nodded, “…… That is correct, this is the one…… This was the sword that I saw piercing through my brows.”

Hearing her words, Chris almost forgot to breathe in shock.

“The longsword that I saw did indeed possess such a crystalline body.”

— The same…….

— The words that she spoke were the same as those of Minerva’s…….

— Is it possible that under the arrangements of destiny, I am to kill the Queen as well?

That moment, Silvia squatted down by the steel bars, flustering the guards standing behind her.

“Your Majesty, you should not bow down to a prisoner!”

“You shouldn’t even have come to meet him here from the start! He is too filthy—“

Cornelius stopped her by catching hold of her arm before she managed to squat down. However, Chris could already see the girl’s eyes clearly in the instant her eyes approached the steel bars.

— Ah…… Her black eyes……

— They're exactly the same as Minerva's…… Like the color of the lightless sky of a new moon's night, brimming with despair and pain……

"Are you perhaps acquainted to my sister?"

Chris nodded at the Queen's question. At the same time, the speculations stirring in his heart rapidly solidified into painful truth under the chilling cold—Minerva was the Queen's elder sister who inherited the cursed bloodline of the Celestials, the true Queen.

"…… Is she okay?"

The young, false Queen's beautiful face looked as though it was melting due to the tears in her eyes.

"Cornelius. Please release this person. I have something to relay to my sister."

"Your Majesty, you jest!"

The guards' clamors were silenced with a look by Cornelius. Silvia did not respond to the voices of dissent, "Please tell my sister that as long as she is safe, I can still persevere…… Ask her not to join any more battles, and look for a peaceful place away from the crowd to live in ……"

As Chris heard her words, he could almost hear the sound of his blood boiling in his body as well.

— *She can still persevere, she said?*

— *Stop fighting, she said?*

— *Can I even say something like that even if I go back alive!*

— *How could I say it! How could I say that to Minerva!*

After the Queen stood up, Cornelius took a step forward. His next action made Chris' eyes widen— He handed over the sword that Gilberto lent to him through the metal bars.

"My lord, what are you doing!"

"Silence."

After saying that, Cornelius tossed the longsword to the ground. The sound of the sword on the floor was like a block of ice shattering from its impact with the ground.

“This is yours. Take it and use it as you will. And also, just get out from here if you can.”

“…… W- Why……”

Cornelius did not answer, but instead spoke to the guards behind him: “Bring Her Majesty back first. The ventilation here is bad. We can’t have Her Majesty wait here.”

“What about you, my lord?”

“I have something more to speak to the prisoner.”

“Cornelius, please, let him return to my sister’s side!”

“I am glad to oblige to Your Majesty’s kindness.”

Silvia gradually disappeared from Chris’ sight while being surrounded by her guards. The young Queen repeatedly turned around to look at Chris as she was leaving.

After awhile, the dense footsteps gradually disappeared from the stone steps. Chris picked up the longsword lying by his side, at the same time raising his head to look at Cornelius.

“You will kill Silvia with that sword. It’s a prophecy. You did hear it, didn’t you?”

“If so, why…… why did you return the sword to me.”

“Because it’s your fate.”

Cornelius bent down, his face slowly approaching the railings.

“It doesn’t matter if you kill anyone, even Minerva.”

“Wh…… at?”

“Tuekay’s power will only be passed on after its owner dies, haven’t you heard of this from Minerva? That is why Silvia and Minerva are sharing the power inherited from their mother, don’t you know? One nation does not need two Queens. As long as one dies, the oracular power will be absorbed by the other.”

“Y- You fieeeennnnnnnnnd!”

"Destiny might change its path just a little because of one person's efforts, but its path will always be headed to the same end. So no matter who you kill, the other will still fall into my hands."

Chris suddenly felt a pain as though someone was forcefully clenching his parched throat.

"I now understand why a pair of sisters inherited Tuekay's power this time. Its purpose is to protect one of them from their unchanging fate of death you brought onto them, allowing her to survive and succeed the position of Queen."

Hence, even if Chris killed one of them, the other would still survive.

"Beast's son……" Cornelius' eyes gleamed suddenly as a smile resembling soldered iron surfaced on his face, "Only you. In this world, only you, the owner of the filthy Brand of the Beast, can kill the Sibyl Queen blessed by Tuekay!"

"Youuuuuuuuuuuuu!"

In his wrath, Chris gripped his longsword, and was about to swing it at the man at the other side of the bars. However, with the movement of one of his fingers, not only did Cornelius stop Chris, it made the nerves in his whole body spasm in agony. Chris could only raise the longsword a few inches from the ground while his wrists were locked in place.

— *What…… is this?*

Cornelius stepped back from the bars while smiling faintly. At the same time, Chris felt as though his body was pressed down to the floor by a heavy object, unable to move even one finger.

“Therefore, you being born into this world, struggling to clamber before me— all of it was for me. You should just continue to struggle in your pool of blood, right until the last second. Even if you now understand that there is a heavy shackle on your neck right now, you are still unable to change anything.”

“…… I’m going to kill you!”

“Such foolishness. Are you perhaps still unaware of the power of destiny? I was chosen by the Gods. Don’t you understand? I will obtain this country and impregnate the Queen with my flesh and blood. When the girl grows up and gains divine power, I will be the one to kill the Queen. That is what the Oracle Decree had dictated. Do you understand now! You, killing me? What a joke. Being chosen by the Gods, I will not die. When you kill Silvia, the future that she foresaw will be completely shifted to Minerva. Then, Minerva will be the one to bear my child, and the one who will be killed by me.”

“Such, such a future—!”

Severe pain suddenly pulsed on Chris’ forehead. The back of his hand holding the longsword started to heat up as well. Meanwhile, a similar glow surfaced on Cornelius’ hands and forehead.

“Your patron god is the God of Pain and Sacrifice, sustenance for my God of Fortune. For that reason you live. For that reason you struggle. And for that reason you die. Die in the darkness where nobody can reach you . Give in to your fate.”

“…… You, who are you. Why do you know so much about—“

Cornelius rose and left while laughing.

The prison sank into darkness once again. Holding his longsword, Chris rolled on the floor while foaming from the pain of his brands.

New moon was approaching.

The Beast craved for blood.

In his ears, Cornelius, and also Silvia's words fused together to resound in his mind. That moment, only the feeling of the chilly blade he was holding allowed him to maintain his consciousness that might fade at any moment.

Chris did not know how long he struggled in the darkness. That moment, the stone floor trembled from noise and sound waves of unknown source. Music from stringed instruments and woodwind could be heard, perhaps due to the Queen's approaching wedding ceremony? The sound of wheels rolling over the stone floor sounded heavy, perhaps due to the number of wedding gifts they were carrying?

However, the sounds were gradually swallowed up by the sound of the Beast, like bubbles surfacing from a quagmire.

All of a sudden, footsteps rang from upstairs, making him spring upright, facing the steel bars while gripping his longsword. The pain in his body even spread to his teeth as light shone upon his eyes. However, when he saw the silhouette at the other side of the bars, he froze, and nearly dropped the sword he was holding as his grip loosened.

The oil lamp illuminated the familiar flaming-red hair, unwavering black eyes seemed to have been frozen on that familiar face, and that person's clothing was in white ……

— *Minerva?*

— *Why?*

Standing before him, Minerva's eyes widened in surprise as well. Her gaze fell on Chris' hand, "…… Why do you have a sword?"

Minerva's question made Chris snap out of his shock, and at the same time, he hurriedly backed away while gripping his longsword, “W- Wait a minute! Minerva, don’t come close to me—“

Minerva raised her heavy greatsword single-handedly, breaking the lock on the door by just using the weight of the sword body. Chris retreated to the walls, “H- How did you get in!”

“I did not sneak in. It’s quite crowded up there, so I did not even have any need to hide. Alright, let us depart .”

That moment, Chris realized that Minerva’s sword was already caked with dried blood, cloth and grime.

“…… Did you come alone?”

“But of course. How could I have involved other people for things like this.”

“Why did you do all this for m—“

“Because you are my belonging!” Minerva approached and grabbed Chris’ collar, “Didn’t you vow to protect me !”

Her roar made Chris avert his eyes.

"I…… can't protect you anymore…… Because…… didn't you see? I killed…… my own comrades…… They weren't involved in any accident, I killed them with my own hands!"

"Idiot! You had no other choice—"

"It's not about me having a choice or not!" Chris' voice , which brought out from him moist, searing emotions, covered up that of Minerva's, "I had already sunk that time, sinking in the feeling of tearing apart flesh and the nostalgic smell of blood! I had fallen! Even though I should have been able to stop it…… I am, a beast. If you come closer to me now, I will probably kill you as well. Cornelius spared my life just so I can kill you……"

"You said…… Cornelius?"

"Yes, I saw the Queen as well…… She told me of a future where she was killed by me as w—"

"Silvia? You saw Silvia? Why!"

As Minerva shouted at Chris, she caught hold of his shoulders and shook it vigorously. Chris explained to her everything that had happened, of Silvia's wish, Cornelius

’ laughter and of the fact that Cornelius returned the sword to him in the end……

“…… So you must listen to Silvia. Run away, leaving your sister and I, escaping by yourself. You cannot be killed by me!”

“Actually, today is the day.”

“…… What?”

In an instant, Chris’ breath and vision were drawn by Minerva’s voice, unable to shift away.

“Today is the day when I will be killed by you.”

“T- Then all the more reason for you to—“

“You just need to escort me safely to Silvia’s side. No need to concern yourself with other matters.”

“This……”

“If that moment truly comes to pass, just do as you will.”

Chris suddenly understood the meaning in Minerva's words— her hidden wish.

In a corner of Santcarillon, there was a large cathedral with a tall clock tower. It was originally a church for the worship of the Palkai gods, but the equipment for worship inside had already been cleared away. Now, the walls were furnished with flags of the Celestial Kingdom, turning the place into the venue for the wedding.

As the aged Duke of Medoccia walked on the cathedral stairs leading to the third floor, he sighed when he saw the revered white walls of the Santcarillon Cathedral tainted by bright purple.

To celebrate the arrival of the Queen, the security in Santcarillon was raised to a baffling level. There was a spear-wielding sentinel in full armor every two steps on each pavement leading to the Cathedral. Meanwhile, the ruler of Medoccia— the Duke of Medoccia was in a state of confinement, and was deterred from taking even one step out from his room.

"My lord, please return to your room."

A middle-aged soldier who seemed to be the captain of the sentinels warned the Duke of Medoccia in a tone unbefitting of one speaking to a noble, raising his spear slightly at the same time. Although the veins could be seen popping out on his bald forehead, the Duke suppressed his anger and answered: “You probably don’t know how to move and store the equipment used for rituals, do you? We will be extremely troubled if you clumsily heave them out like swords and break them.”

“The ornaments used in worshipping pagan gods won’t be needed from today onwards.”

The surrounding young soldiers burst into laughter at the end of the sentinel captain’s words.

“They’ll have to be disposed of anyway, what harm will there be if there are one or two bumps on them.”

“I- Insolent fool!”

As the Duke roared in anger, he rushed forward to grab the sentinel captain, disregarding his own age. A performance like this was already the most that the Duke could do with all his efforts. Indeed, a group of sentinels hurried over quickly.

“Are you mad!”

“My lord, please calm down!”

“How could you do something so unbefitting of your status at a time of celebration like this!”

Four soldiers rushed forward to pull away the sentinel captain, but that did not suppress the chaotic scene. That moment, the Duke could see servants moving his belongings out of his bedroom at the end of the corridors .

“Damn, get him back to his room and don’t let him out until the secret ritual of the Holy Wedding is complete!”

At the sentinel captain’s orders, his subordinates roughly dragged the Duke of Medoccia on the red carpet back to his room.

When the doors were closed and the sound of clanking armor and footsteps gradually faded, the Duke of Medoccia turned around to look at the old foreman servant standing at a corner of the room. He asked: “Are you sure you were not noticed?”

“Ah, yes, most probably.”

The servant approached the Duke, his back bending over at the same time.

“Is it really okay to do this? If you are noticed, the Celestials will—“

“Silence!” The Duke of Medoccia lowered his voice, but his words still shot at the foreman servant like an arrow: “I have yet to lose my pride!”

“Y- Yes! My apologies, my lord!”

That moment, someone suddenly knocked on the door . The Duke of Medoccia and his servant jumped in shock.

“Duke of Medoccia. Are you there?”

A young, sharp voice pierced through the door. The Duke and the servant slowly approached the door and opened it with a resentful expression.

“I am here to apologize to you.”

The person standing outside the door was Cornelius. He was already wearing the luxurious white robes used in the Holy Wedding.

“O- Oh my, if it isn’t the Consort Prospect…… No, right now it’s more appropriate to call you the Royal Consort.” The Duke of Medoccia said with a small smile.

“I am still not a part of royalty before the secret ritual is completed. Besides, I am here to ask for forgiveness for my subordinates’ rudeness.”

As he responded, Cornelius looked as though he was wearing a human skin mask with a smile carved on. His appearance made the Duke break out in cold sweat.

(They haven’t found out, have they?)

(I have to be calm. Act normal.)

“It’s nothing. I was the one who lost my composure. I should be the one apologizing for doing inappropriate actions on your wedding day instead. Please forgive me. ”

Cornelius scrutinized the Duke’s small figure and nodded while taking a step back, “Let us meet later then. When the ritual is complete, I shall invite you to the Cathedral as Royal Consort. You will join the festivities of the Weneralia Festival, no?”

“O- Of course.”

The Duke answered with a rigid smile.

The grand Weneralia Festival would be held after the completion of the secret ritual between the Queen, Consort Prospect and a few priests before Tuekay.

(Hmph. I wonder what other commotion would occur before that.)

The Duke of Medoccia leant his back against the door and sighed heavily, as though he was puffing out his internal organs in one breath.

(The only thing that I can do now is to pray.)

(Wait, should I just use this time to escape?)

In deep thought, he shifted his gaze towards the scene outside his windows as the bells of the clock tower rang with the solemn, holy horns.

(The ritual has started……)

Santcarillon Cathedral was a large building with three floors. The second was a balcony built inside the building on the four walls, allowing one to see the whole first floor. Behind the altar on the first floor, there was a wall painting so elaborate that it did not seem to be drawn by human hand. The cathedral could contain at most three thousand people at the same time, and was known to be the largest cathedral in the East.

The third floor of the cathedral was separate from the first and second floors, and was the Divine Chamber where only bishops could enter. This place originally harbored quite a few statues of the Palkai gods, which were placed above the altar surrounded by tall stone pillars. However, the statues were currently shifted away , and were replaced with a flag with the crest of a winged wheel. Delicate Silvia, on the other hand, lied down on the altar in front of the flag. The thin chiffon robe on her made her look as if white feathers were scattered on her body.

There was one row of shrine maidens standing at each of the two sides of the altar chanting holy scriptures. With his head bowed, Cornelius sensed the three priests splashing fragrant oils on Silvia using complicated gestures as he immersed himself in the atmosphere.

"…… Can happiness be obtained? Those who gather sunlight, those who draw moonlight……"

The white-haired priest standing in the middle murmured the holy scriptures. That moment, Cornelius slowly stood up from the ground.

Silvia still had her eyes closed as her body trembled slightly. The elegant curves of her body could be clearly seen after the chiffon robe on her was wetted by fragrant oil.

(Am I really able to obtain her so easily?)

(How boring……)

The sermon that sent one into stupors the longer they listened to it continued to resound. However, a loud clatter behind them caused the peace to collapse. All of the priests and shrine maidens hurriedly raised their heads with their faces pale, and even Silvia opened her eyes in shock.

Cornelius slowly turned around.

The double door of the sacred place looked somewhat far away due to the stone pillars arranged neatly at the two sides of the door. The next thing that attracted their attention was striking red flames and a heavy greatsword reflecting a grey radiance. Apart from that, there was also another silhouette.

A twisted smile surfaced on Cornelius' face.

(So, will this be the place where fate blossoms?)

One of the uninvited guests collapsed the stone pillar by the door along with the ceiling with a slash of the greatsword, causing the shrine maidens present to scream. The collapsed rocks completely blocked the double door. The duo approached the altar with large strides. Among the panicking priests, Silvia gazed blankly at the intruder while muttering:

"…… Sister?"

That moment, Chris and Minerva already had their whole bodies stained in blood. As Minerva marched towards the altar with Chris behind her, she dragged along her greatsword in her hands, creating a long trail of blood on the white tiles of the Divine Chamber.

They had already killed numerous soldiers of the Celestial Kingdom. On their way here, they coincidentally passed by a stone bridge connecting two buildings. Minerva collapsed the bridge with her sword, causing hundreds of soldiers to fall to their deaths.

Minerva and Chris couldn’t help but feel that the enemy would catch up soon by using a ladder, and thus resolved to settle everything before that happened.

They could hear Cornerlius reprimanding the priests in front of them.

“Calm down. The guards will be here soon. Be careful not to stain your robes with blood. Keep to the walls!”

“But my lord—“

“I shall protect Her Majesty. Besides, Her Majesty has the protection of the Gods as well. She has no need to fear these scum.”

“Sister!”

Silvia’s cry resounded between the stone pillars, causing the frozen air to suddenly tremble. The surrounding priests couldn’t help themselves from starting a discussion, and their reaction was most probably because they realized that Minerva's red hair and white robe was the same as the Queen beside them.

"N- No! Sister, don't come closer!"

"…… Silvia, I won't run away anymore."

As Minerva answered, she continued to walk while dragging her heavy greatsword.

"All this time, I left the pain for you to bear all by yourself…… But all of this ends here. I will resolve everything at the end of this day."

"Lady Minerva, nothing will end at the end of this day ."

Cornelius' lips curved in a smile, and at the same time he took out the ornamental sword on the altar, "Your life, your body, and each droplet of blood in your body will be an offering to the Gods. No matter how you struggle, the results will not change."

"CORNELIUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUS!"

With a roar of anger, Minerva dashed forward. Her sleeves danced as she raised her greatsword, creating a whistling sound along the way.

"Minerva, don't let his sword touch you!"

Chris warned Minerva and rushed forward as well.

Cornelius jumped down from the stairs before the altar . Minerva swung her sword in a powerful slash in his direction, forcing her whole weight on the sword, but was deftly deflected by Cornelius with his gold ornamental sword. Deflected from its path, the greatsword slashed at the stone pillar beside them, mercilessly slicing the pillar in half. The shrine maidens shrieked and hurriedly retreated behind the stone pillars at the other side of the room, and were quickly followed by the priests. Cornelius swung his sword at Minerva's back, but his attack was nimbly blocked by Minerva's sword hilt. However, the attack made Minerva lose her balance, spinning backwards in a circle. While Cornelius quickly gave chase, his legs were blocked by the tip of Minerva's greatsword that she flourished as she fell. This gave her a chance to stand up again. The blood on the greatsword as heavy as steel plates splattered onto the pillars, floor and also the robe used for the wedding ceremony on Cornelius.

"You wish to kill me? I, who was chosen from an Oracle Decree? Hah!"

Minerva blocked Cornelius' lunge with her sword body as he continued to laugh maniacally. That moment, Chris thrust his sword directly at Cornelius' throat from behind Minerva. While Chris strongly believed that the attack would be fatal, he did not feel his sword piercing through flesh and blood. Cornelius dodged his attack by millimeters by turning his head away.

"The reason that I evaded your attack was not because I saw through it." After he said that in a jeering tone, he kicked away Chris' sword and hid in the shade behind a stone pillar, "It was because your sword swayed away by itself. I could dodge it even with my eyes closed."

"Rubbish!"

Minerva sprang upwards and swung her sword horizontally at Cornelius' white robe. The greatsword pierced through the stone pillar, but Cornelius had already retreated to the altar. His movements were so quick it was unbelievable.

"Sister, please stop! Hurry up and escape! The guards will be here soon!"

Draped in chiffon, Silvia suddenly gave a wail. The priests who previously ran away had reached the entrance of the Divine Chamber, and were moving away rocks while they picked up a ladder, probably to let the soldiers inside. But before that......

“—Who are you going to kill? Me?”

Cornelius’ voice resounded in Chris’ mind. He could not move his legs all of a suddenly, and could only look at Minerva’s silhouette as she approached the altar.

That moment, Cornelius pulled Silvia into his embrace on the altar.

“Ah!”

He clasped his left hand on Silvia’s throat, pointed the golden sword in his hand at Minerva, and shifted it to Chris, “Aren’t I the one you wish to kill? No?”

“Let go of Silvia!”

“I am speaking to the Beast’s son. Who is the one you are supposed to kill? Have you remembered?”

That instant, Cornelius’ left hand on Silvia’s throat emitted a pale glow— the insignia. At the same time, Chris suddenly felt a sharp pain on his forehead and hands, as though resonating with the radiance on his hands. Not only his forehead and hands, but his right shoulder as well. Chris’ limbs started to feel like lead. It was as though his whole being was tossed into a winter river. He couldn’t even feel anything with his body. When his hands were raised, he launched an attack on the red-haired girl before him.

“Wha—! Chris?”

Minerva turned around with astonishing reflexes and blocked Chris’ attack with her greatsword. Strands of cut red hair fluttered in the air. With a dazed expression on him as though in a trance, Chris raised his sword once again.

“Chris, you—“

“…… S- Stop it! Cornelius!”

Chris forced out a few words, but his body could no longer be controlled by his own will. The tip of the longsword drew out a smooth curve in the air directly at Minerva's head. Although it was blocked by the greatsword, the attack scraped a line on the sword hilt. That moment, Chris could not feel anything apart from the pain from his brands and the wound on his shoulder.

Cornelius burst out into mad laughter at a side, "How foolish. Did you think I would just let you lie there when you lost consciousness?"

The shoulder wound. It was a from Cornelius' demonic sword. I was too careless. The regret that Chris felt tore at his soul, almost shredding his heart into pieces. Even so, his body continued to launch attacks lethal enough to kill with startling speed and at a sharp angle. He could feel the blood of the Beast in his body penetrating his whole body. Even though Minerva was able to predict his attacks, the speed of his sword was quicker than Minerva could evade. It was impossible for Minerva to block all of his attacks.

"— Minerva, kill me! Kill me, quickly!"

“Idiot! How could I do such a thing! Hurry up and snap out of it! Chris!”

“No! Just kill me already—“

Chris used up all of his energy to cry out, though he still launched an attack directly at Minerva’s back. Minerva’s greatsword flew out of her hands as she spun in a circle, falling at the foot of a stone pillar in the end. The follow-up attack cut a deep gash on Minerva’s thigh. If not for her quick speed, the attack might have already severed her leg instead. Minerva bled as her back rammed heavily onto the stone pillar.

Chris’ limbs were already numb. The only reason he could move was due to someone manipulating his body, forcing him to take action. However, now that Minerva had no weapon on her, it was impossible for her to escape due to her leg injury.

Chris swung the blood off his longsword, and took one step, another step and another, slowly advancing on Minerva.

“Beast’s son. Choose whoever you wish to kill.”

After he said that, Cornelius loosened his grip on Silvia and released her.

“Sister!”

Chris saw the Queen run towards Minerva with her frail body as his consciousness continued to flicker.

“Cornelius! Please, let my sister go!”

“That is something that the Beast shall decide on. It has been predetermined to be so.”

Cornelius said coolly and stepped on rubble on the ground as he walked towards the two Queens.

Minerva clung her sister’s arm as she raised her gaze. Blood trickled down her face, creating a trail of blood that gave her beautiful features a sense of heart wrenching melancholy.

“Chris.”

Chris heard Minerva call his name. The eyes as clear as the new moon gazed at him, making him feel severe pain from his brands.

“Kill us both,” mumbled Minerva in a low voice, as though in prayers. Silvia, who was beside her, couldn’t help but stare at her sister’s face as a look of surprise surfaced on her face. Chris’ hazy consciousness was thus shocked into clarity by Minerva’s voice. That moment, the sisters were standing together in an embrace before Cornelius, whose brands were glowing on his hands.

“End this bloodline once and for all…… Right now, you are the only one who can do this.”

“How foolish,” Cornelius spat out the words, “This beast is currently in my control. I shall not allow that to occur. Is that what you desire?”

“Sister, no…… Don’t.”

Silvia continued to shake her head with tears trailing down her face as she stood in Minerva’s embrace.

“If you truly wish for such a thing to occur, then you might as well strangle your sister right now and commit suicide after that. However, that is impossible. You are neither capable of murdering your sister nor committing suicide, for you are a human. That is why we push such filthy matters on the beast. It is the same for you and I.”

When Chris saw Minerva's face contort in agony, he knew the truth.

He understood that it was as Cornelius had said.

"The fact that you will be the one remaining, and also the fact that your sister will be the one to remain. You fear them both. Can't you see? This fear has also been predetermined as well!"

"…… Yes. I…… have already……"

Trails of tears flowed down Minerva's face that was drained of color. That moment, Chris finally understood.

— I see now. So this, is the reason.

Cornelius frowned. He noticed that his control on Chris had weakened just a little. Minerva opened her eyes moist with tears and gazed at Chris. Probably, that was because Chris was laughing.

"…… Minerva, I finally understand."

"What…… do you understand?"

“I finally understand why I devoured your omens of death.”

The jet black eyes moved in confusion in their sockets glistening with tears.

Why would the Beast that should have devoured fortunes of other people, bringing disaster upon them, devour Minerva’s death?

“Minerva, it is because you have always desired death. In that way, you will be free from all the pain on you, and your fate of being killed by me is your desired happiness…… Isn’t that right?”

Minerva did not answer. She hugged her sister even tighter as she continued to shed tears. From that, Chris perceived that it was the answer to all his questions.

— That was the reason.

— The Beast devoured Minerva’s fortune, allowing her to live on……

The brand on Chris' forehead shone in overbearing heat. The strong sense of pain even started blurring his vision.

"…… Such folly. If so, bestow upon her the fortune that she so desires, Beast's son."

Silvia suddenly started struggling in her sister's embrace right after Cornelius said that, "Stop! Don't kill my sister, let me—"

That moment, feeling returned to Chris' limbs once again. He stepped forward one step after another, making the flesh and muscles in his body wail out in protest. But in his vision, a trace of a smile surfaced on Minerva's face.

"…… Then let that be so," murmured Minerva, "That must surely be the reason for my encounter with y—"

"Don't mess with me!" Before Minerva even finished her words, Chris blocked out her words with a roar of fury, "I did not stay by your side for this to happen!"

"W- What are you—"

— I did not meet you to kill you!

— If escaping from pain to death is the only hope in your life ……

— Then……

"I'll devour that fate of yours!"

Tears on Minerva's face fell on a lock of hair on her chest, shattering into dazzling fragments.

Meanwhile, Cornelius gave a wail of wrath and raised his hand on which his insignia was glowing high into the air. Dark energy flowed into Chris' body, making him slowly extend his right hand holding the longsword. That moment, Chris twisted his neck and gave his arm a sharp bite.

"You brute! Doing such meaningless actions!"

Chris' teeth pierced deeply into his flesh. Intense pain spread from his ears to his eyes. Even so, the movements of his right arm did not stop. That moment, he realized that the frustrating sense of numbness of his legs had disappeared, turning into extreme pain. Silvia, who stood in front of Minerva in an attempt to shield her, retaliated with her bloodstained foot. Chris saw himself reflected in her black eyes. The Beast Brand shining on his forehead was displaying his filthy name.

“Sister! Let go of me—“

Silvia struggled by twisting around her body. That moment, the pair of sisters had their gazes locked onto each other. The reflection of the Beast disappeared from Chris’ view as well, leaving only one thing— sound.

(Devour!)

The Beast’s howls shook Chris’ skull.

(Devour them!)

(Eat up their fates till the end!)

His right hand was raised unconsciously all of a sudden. The sound of a blade thirsty for blood shattered the Oracle Decree bestowed by Tuekay.

That moment, noise echoed from somewhere far away — the sound of an old brass wheel toppling.

The sound of collision of bloodstained fangs pouncing upon rusted axles.

The sound of wings breaking, feathers scattering.

It was the sound of fate being distorted.

It was that which Minerva and Silvia had seen— death
.

A blade piercing through the brows— it was reflected on their jet black eyes— Not in the least stained by blood, the sword body was as smooth as crystals—

The right part of Chris' body burnt in intense pain. The sound of coming death that resounded from the wound that his teeth tore open muffled out the roars of the Beast that devoured fortune. The bloodied fingers that lost all feeling loosened, allowing the sword hilt to slip away, letting it fall, and fall—

It pierced through the space between the eyes of the duo.

Chris saw Cornelius' contorted face, and also the insignia shining on the back of his raised left hand— the crystalline blade had pierced through the sign of the one who was blessed with fortune, penetrating his robe worn for a majestic ceremony, stabbing into his chest.

All of a sudden, the sound of fate collapsing dispersed from Chris' mind. He fell on his knees as reality surfaced before his eyes at the speed of light. He tried to grasp something, but no energy was left in his trembling fingers. Finally—

He caught it. A warm hand gripped his wrist, at the same time supporting his body that nearly collapsed.

The screen controlling him that shielded his consciousness and various parts of his body had completely disappeared. He felt a surge of pain two times as severe as before. Only a thin strand of thread kept together his joints that almost fell apart. The chilling touch sank deep into every part of his body.

At the fallen altar, Cornelius was nailed to the wall with a longsword. Blood from his chest stained his robe red as his trembling hands raised weakly to pull out the blade, but fell again halfway through. Before he died, a radiant smile was still plastered on Cornelius' face.

In the end, these images gradually distorted in Chris' eyes as well as his consciousness faded. Pain, scorching heat and cold body temperature fused into one.

But he did not fall.

He felt arms around him in an embrace while red hair dangling before his eyes stuck to his forehead.

"— Chris!"

It hurt. The voice calling his name, the fingers gripping his skin, one of his wounds pulsing somewhere on his body, all of them hurt. The droplets falling on his chest felt hot like scorching iron.

"Y- You, you idiot! D- Doing something like this—"

Not one bit of heat remained anywhere in Chris' body. Because of that, he could only maintain his fading consciousness by clutching onto the sound by his ears. He tried not to let his consciousness fade into oblivion, as he saw Minerva's crying face, crying in sorrow just like any other ordinary girl.

“Sister!”

The voice made Minerva jump in shock. Chris turned his neck slightly in his overwhelming pain, shifting his gaze towards the direction that Silvia’s finger was pointing at. Sounds of someone pushing on the door could be heard from the rubble. As the door gave way, the rubble piled up in front of the door collapsed.

Armored soldiers filled the whole corridor outside. The oil lamps that they were holding illuminated the whole Divine Chamber.

“Your Majesty!” “My lord, are you alright!”

The soldiers who rushed inside kicked away the debris under their feet. Minerva quickly grabbed her greatsword lying on the ground and placed Chris in Silvia’s lap. When she was about to take a step forward, she clutched her leg due to severe pain and bent down.

“Ngh……”

“Sister, I shall stop them!”

It's impossible…… was what Chris wanted to say, but he couldn't make any noise. Murderous intent surfaced in the eyes of the surrounding soldiers.

"H- Hey, the Archduke is……" "Murdered!"

"Your Majesty! Who are these people!" "Your Majesty, please get away from the assassins!"

— Have we any choice but to charge outside?

— Minerva's leg is injured, and my arms can't move…… Even so……

— How can we die at a place like this?

With a howl, Minerva raised her greatsword, blocked the spear targeting her and knelt down once more. Her abdomen was kicked, and she was pressed down to the floor after she fell.

"Minervaaaaaaaaaaa!"

Chris hurried over, but tripped over the hilt of a spear that was viciously swung under his feet, causing him to ram into a pillar. He heard Silvia's cries of shock, but he was already so confused that he didn’t even know where his limbs connected to his body anymore. Chris did not give up, and tried to search for any energy remaining in his body……

— Move! Move already! Blast!

— We already came this far! At a place like this, how can we —!

Just at that moment, the soldier pressing Minerva’s shoulders down suddenly gave a harsh cry as his body arched unnaturally backwards— a dagger pierced accurately into the slit between the helmet and the armor. The soldier’s eyes widened so much that his eyeballs nearly popped out of their sockets as he fell. The death of the soldier in heavy armor started a commotion around him.

“What!” “What is this!” “Where is the attack coming fro—”

As projectiles whistled through the air, wails arose from numerous soldiers of the Celestial Kingdom once again. This time, bows and daggers rained simultaneously on them, making them fall onto the white tile stones one after another.

“Wha- D- Dammiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiit!”

All of a sudden, a soldier beside Chris pulled him to his feet by his arm. Extreme pain tore apart his nerves. However, a sharp flash severed the soldier’s arm from his shoulder. His companions were dumbfounded at the look of the soldier spurting blood while rolling on the ground.

With a look of disbelief, Chris raised his head to see a tall, silver-haired man clad in black standing before him. In his hands, he held a longsword stained in blood that was just extracted from a corpse. It was still reflecting light like a mirror.

“Didn’t I tell you not to let go of this sword no matter any situation you encounter?”

The man glared at Chris coldly for a moment and swiftly swung his sword to sever the throat of a soldier approaching with a spear. When he turned around, he cut off the shoulders of a soldier lunging at Minerva.

“…… Gilberto?”

“T- This…… Where did he come out from!” “Isn’t that Gilberto of Zaccaria!”

Discussion turned into wails of despair. Chris’ eyes widened when he turned around. In the chamber, not only was there Nicolo who kept on throwing daggers, there were other members of the Order who seemed to have popped out from the underground as well.

No, they really did come out from under the floorboards. There was a staircase under the altar. After dashing out from the staircase, they formed a human wall, pushing the formation of Celestial Kingdom soldiers back. The person who walked up the stairs was a silhouette with dazzling golden hair— Francesca.

She glanced at Chris, giving him a relieved smile and walked directly in Silvia’s direction.

“Your Majesty, please pardon my rudeness.”

“— Eh?”

Without waiting for Silvia’s answer, Francesca slipped a coat with white, wing-like sleeves onto her and withdrew a dagger.

“Nobody moves!”

The proclamation of the daughter of the Duke of Zaccaria echoed in the whole Divine Chamber.

Francesca only brought along twenty men with her. Apart from that, there was also Minerva, who had sustained all sorts of injuries, Chris, who was at the brink of death, and the Queen of the Celestial Kingdom, Silvia, who was still wearing the robes exclusively for the secret ritual of the Holy Wedding. The Celestial Army focused their murderous gazes on them. However, they still walked through the courtyard of Santcarillon in clear view, exiting the city from the East Gate in a dignified manner.

It was all due to the dagger that Francesca kept pressed onto Silvia’s neck.

With his heavy injuries, not only was Chris unable to walk, he could not even stand up and had to be carried by Gilberto. Although Gilberto’s way of carrying him at his side was rather rough, it still helped a little in maintaining Chris' consciousness as his wounds were rattled time after time.

When they stepped into the area without the city gate surrounding it, they finally realized the majestic strength of the cold night wind. The chilly wind soothed the burning pain a little. The pain on the wounded faded gradually like a dream, probably since their receptors of pain gradually numbed.

The solitary new moon rose in the starless night skies, chasing their footsteps to any place.

"It's all thanks to the Duke of Medoccia this time……"

Francesca muttered as they left Santcarillon, reaching a patch of grassland.

"But I do hope that they won't realize that he led us inside."

It was said that the person who brought Francesca and her men inside using the escape route of the Santcarillon Cathedral, from the underground graveyard to the top floor of the cathedral, was the Duke of Medoccia. He pretended to be humble and servile under the flag of the

Celestial Army, but in reality retained his pride of a commander, with his heart in the campsite of the Allied Army that he was a part of.

"But how in the world did you meet the Duke of Medoccia?"

Minerva was carried on Nicolo's back. She muttered with a flushed look of displeasure:

"I already said that I didn't want to drag you in……"

"He sent someone to stuff us into crates containing gifts, then carried us into the city. But thanks to his plan, all of us are aching all over."

The surrounding knights burst into laughter at the same time at Nicolo's answer. So that was why they weren't wearing armor…… Chris finally understood the reason behind that. Although everyone was laughing happily, if there was just one chink in their battle plan, the infiltration unit would have been in danger of total eradication, like if someone asked to see the contents of the crate, or if someone realized that the Duke of Medoccia was acting as a spy, or if the Queen was not at their final destination…… All of those were dangers that could not be overlooked.

— Why did they use such a risky tactic?

Chris looked in incomprehension at Francesca’s white face that shone with a clear radiance under the moon.

“…… Because I am Francesca da Zaccaria. Won’t that reason suffice?”

As though seeing through the questions in Chris’ heart , Francesca gave him a smile.

A line of people met up with another unit awaiting further orders with their horses on a bridge. Over there, they allowed Chris to rest on a wooden plank, making him feel his temperature evaporate little by little.

Almost all of the knights were on horseback. That moment, Francesca said to Silvia: “Your Majesty, now, I will have to ask you to return by yourself. It is our deepest regret that we are unable to escort you back.”

“Fran?”

Hearing that, Minerva hurriedly clutched her sister’s hand, questioning Francesca’s previous statement: “What are you talking about. We should take Silvia away as well!”

“No, we cannot bring Her Majesty back to the Allied Army.”

“Why!”

“If so, this war will never truly end. The Three Great Duchies have yet to be vanquished while the priests of the Inner Palace who tied down the taxes of the nations have yet to disappear. If so, nothing will have changed.”

Minerva frowned in displeasure.

“Sister.”

Seeing her reaction, Silvia placed her hand gently on her shoulder— That moment, the younger Silvia looked as though she was older than her elder sister, weathered like an old tree that had experienced vicissitudes of the seasons.

“It is as she said. Please understand her feelings.”

"W- W- What are you talking about, Silvia! If you return to the Celestial Kingdom, you will once again—"

"But if I go to Zaccaria, this war will no longer involve only the Celestial Kingdom and the Allied Army."

Hearing Silvia's words, Minerva caught hold of the hand on her shoulder. She gripped Silvia's hand. Piteous trembling could be felt from it. In fact, Minerva knew in her heart that it was the truth. After all, if a small nation welcomed the Queen, it would bring conflict upon the country and the other members of the Alliance, while the Celestial Kingdom would send troops to reclaim the Queen as well, and might not hesitate to burn down one or two territories of the Duke of Zaccaria, attacking them again and again.

"That is why I must return to Santuario. To reduce the scale of the war and to bring peace, there is no other wa—"

"If all that you have said were true—" Minerva couldn't help but press her face closer to Silvia's shoulders in agitation, "Then for what reason did I bring you……"

"I saw you."

Under the rays of moonlight from the new moon, Silvia stretched out her hand to caress a strand of her sister’s red hair as she said in a gentle tone: “Even for a little while, as long as I can see you, I already feel happy. Besides, there are so many people around you who will protect you!”

The words drifted into Chris’ wounds, causing deep pain as though salt was penetrating his flesh.

“But you don’t have them!”

“I have you. Even if we are apart, our blood ties cannot be severed. Our hearts are still connected.”

“Then I shall return to Santuario with you!”

“Sister, please don’t say something so willful. To those who are here, you are an irreplaceable existence.”

Minerva could not think of anything to rebuke her anymore. With her head dropped in speechlessness, her sobs did not stop for a long time.

“Your Majesty, the horse……?”

Silvia smiled softly at Francesca’s question and shook her head, “I have never ridden a horse before.”

“My deepest apologies. We have offended you so much, and still have to ask you to walk back in the end……”

“No, it’s fine. After all, it has been a while since I went for a walk outside the city by myself. I might as well enjoy the road. However, the weather is rather chilly. May I borrow a cape?”

Francesca bowed down her head deeply at Silvia’s request.

“If the war ends one day, and we still have a chance to meet……”

“…… Yes?”

“Can you teach me how to ride?”

“It will be my greatest honor.”

The Queen turned around and left. All who were present watched her depart without even a glance backwards. Only Minerva had her back onto the bridge as she squatted down on the ground, silently running her hand through the soil to hold back the agitation in her heart.

That night was so quiet that one could almost hear the moon spinning on its orbit.

When the small silhouette disappeared in the swaying grassland, Francesca ordered her men to pour oil on the bridge and burn it down. After all, when the Queen returns to Santcarillon, there will surely be soldiers in pursuit.

Blazing flames split the fates of Minerva and Silvia into branching pathways once again.

“Let us depart!”

Francesca jumped onto her saddle while Minerva refused to budge on the ground. Seeing the injury on her leg, Nicolo shrugged, “She won’t be able to ride like this.”

“Never mind. Just leave me here.”

Minerva spat out the words in displeasure, making Francesca sigh heavily, “Do we only have one plank? It can’t be helped then. Chris, lie to a side and make some space. Let Minerva sleep with you.”

“What! H- How can that be! Ack! S- Stop, stop! Let go of me!”

Ignoring her protests, Nicolo grabbed her and easily carried her to the plank. Due to her pain, she couldn’t even protest in a rougher way. In a fluster, Chris moved away to leave some space by his side for Minerva.

“Should we just tie them both together so that they won’t fall down?”

“Fran! I’ll remember this!”

While laughing, the surrounding knights carried the plank which Chris and Minerva lied upon by its four corners. That moment, the two on the plank had their back to each other, and could not see each other’s faces. However, Chris knew that flow of tears in Minerva’s eyes had yet to be stilled. He did not know how to comfort her, and could only grip the hand touching his. The temperature from it was not scorching heat, but warmth from a person.

That moment, Chris suddenly recalled the brands on Cornelius. He thought that his brands were proof of his cursed fate that belonged only to him. However, Cornelius let slip the name of Gods when he mentioned the brands: the God of Fortune, God of Pain…… He did not know if the power in him was as Cornelius had said, the power of one who owned a brand. However, he knew that he could never escape the fate that awaited him. At the same time, he knew that he would have to struggle in such cruel fate.

“— Chris……”

Minerva called Chris’ name in a voice that was almost muffled by the sounds of hooves and wind through the grassy land.

“…… Hmm?”

He did not turn around, and just let his shoulders show his response.

“Say, when I asked you to kill me, you looked sad…… ” She tightened her grip on Chris’ hand slightly, “I forgot about you…… I forgot that I said that I kept you by my side to suppress that power of yours……”

— That…… was the same for me……

“I forgot…… Sorry.”

“…… You don’t need to apologize. I am not angry. After all……”

As he spoke, he felt the warmth on his back shift as she moved.

“I don’t really know how to say this as well…… Well, probably…… it’s because of you, Minerva.”

Chris felt Minerva turn her head around abruptly.

“I didn’t want you to die…… I want to prevent that from happening no matter what. So…… there’s no particular reason, that is, I don’t have any other motives. I just want you to live on, that’s all……”

All of a sudden, the slender fingers clasping onto Chris’ five fingers tightened their grip so much that her nails sank into his flesh.

"…… Minerva? T- That hurts."

"Shut up! Be quiet!"

"D- Did I say anything wrong?"

"Stop talking! Idiot! Don't turn around, don't look!"

Chris turned around to look at Minerva's reaction. However, she immediately turned her head away. Messy hair covered her face, but Chris did indeed see a faint blush on the skin below the strands of hair.

— Perhaps making such a request was just too willful of me.

Chris turned to his side and gazed at the new moon that was slender like a strand of silver in the night sky, and at the same time reaffirmed the warmth behind him.

— I might have to continue to bear the pain of death upon me……

— But I hope that Minerva will be able to live on.

— Even if what she faces…… is a gentle pain that can take away all the pain on her, I shall give it my all to devour that death.

The slender fingers clasping his own curled around his whole palm. Her grip was strong, even stronger than just now.

"…… Minerva, it really hurts. Your grip is too strong, can you relax—"

"Idiot, I- I'm afraid that you will fall down from here!"

Perhaps due to the fact that the surrounding people heard Minerva's overly loud shout, except for the knights on horseback, even Francesca turned around in a fit of giggles to look at them from the front.

"So……" Minerva hurriedly lowered her voice. She thought, Chris was probably the only one who could hear that, "So don't you leave my side as you wish."

Chris did not answer, but just tightened his grip on the small hand, feeling the warmth spreading from it.

— *From today onwards, I shall fight for this cause.*

— *Even if it is just a struggle against my fate, it does not matter.*

— *From today onwards, my blood shall flow for Minerva.*

He closed his eyes. In the night sky that he could see from the bottom of his eyelids, the new moon gave him a peaceful smile.

Chapter 11 – Brand

Footfalls stopped outside the door behind Consort Prospect Galelius, who was sitting before a large stone desk in the room as he read the document that was spread on the desk. He removed his glasses and looked over his shoulders while throwing the end of his toga to his back. The person who walked in while being saluted by the spear-wielding guards was a man with sunken eyes prominent against his flat face. Dressed in a similar toga, he— Lucius, was a Consort Prospect as well.

After Galelius and Lucius both raised a hand in greeting, they did not read out any particular holy scripture. One reason was because a person among their trio was not present, and they were currently in mourning because of that as well, so they decided to keep things simple.

“Haven’t you decided how to deal with Medoccia yet? ”

Lucius snorted as he glanced at the document on the desk.

“Regarding Cornelius’ death, if we can just find out what the Duke of Medoccia did behind us, we can sentence him to death directly……” Galelius shrugged and said: “Unfortunately, the old fox did a wonderful job of hiding away all signs. Hmph, lucky for him.”

“Galelius, from your age, it is fitting to call you an old fox as well.”

Galelius merely raised his whiting brows at Lucius’ ridicules. In the past, it was rare for a person over fifty like Galelius to ascend upon the position of Archduke after attaining the title of Consort Prospect. However, he did not want to be compared with the Duke of Medoccia. After all, the Duke of Medoccia was still unwilling to pass on his title to his son even though he was nearly seventy, and continued a sly correspondence with the Celestial Kingdom.

“Speaking of which, did the Allied Army return to their respective countries from Epabella?” As though he just realized something, Lucius hurriedly changed the topic, “Although the Archbishop escaped from Cornelius

’ clutches in the end, we have taken Santcarillon. That means that we found a chink in their armor. This war is practically ours now.”

“Nobody said that we lost the battle,” Galelius crossed his fingers, “It seems like the Archbishop is now advocating the people to reclaim the Cathedral of Princinopolis, and it was frowned on by the Dukes of the Six Countries.”

Lucius’ teeth showed as he laughed, “This means that the Allied Army might be torn apart if we give them a little push. This is a great opportunity.”

“I know that as well.”

“Then why are you feeling so depressed? You probably didn’t summon me just to inform me of a battle won by our army, did you?”

“There was a new Oracle Decree. It’s about the Royal Consort.”

His words made Lucius’ jaw drop open for a moment …… It was about the Royal Consort, the matter about the esteemed position of the Queen’s husband, that was left untouched ever since Cornelius’ death.

"……. It hasn't been a month since Cornelius was killed, and Her Majesty is still looking rather fragile. How could she accept an Oracle Decree by use of medication? Is this truly an Oracle Decree by Tuekay?"

As Queen Silvia's powers of accepting Oracle Decrees were insufficient, she had proclaimed foggy hallucinations as Oracle Decrees quite a few times now. However, Galelius shook his head at that.

"Indeed, the Archduke chosen as Royal Consort died before the Holy Wedding. That is something that never occurred before this, so I'm not surprised that you would doubt this. However, Her Majesty had seen even the brand in Tuekay's Oracle Decree."

Lucius looked at the document on the table, "…… I don't recall seeing this insignia before. From its shape, it looks like a brand of House Epimex……" As he remembered something, he pointed at the insignias on his forehead and then the back of his hand while pointing at the picture on the document, "Someone who has this brand…… not only would he become the Royal Consort, won't he become the head of House Epimex as well?"

Galelius nodded at Lucius’ question. Although there was no precedent, if one became the Royal Consort, he would of course ascend to the position of the head of the House as well.

“Since House Epimex is so large, we might even have to search for this person elsewhere.”

“No……”

Galelius denied Lucius’ opinion, but did not answer immediately as well. He was hesitant if he should inform Lucius of that. Besides, there was not any proof regarding the actual candidate of Royal Consort chosen in the Oracle Decree, and he did not like acting brashly without evidence as well. However, he thought that things might get troublesome if Lucius did not know of it , and thus spoke to Lucius.

“…… Her Majesty seems to know clues about the owner of this brand.”

“Does that mean that we don’t have to search for him? ”

“But Her Majesty is unwilling to reveal his identity.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know.”

Lucius snorted. Galelius was actually of the same opinion as Lucius, just that Lucius expressed his helplessness in a more direct way. If Cornelius was still alive, he would probably force it out of the Queen, disregarding her status……

Although Galelius avoided enraging Cornelius due to his somewhat domineering manner of doing things due to his young age, now that Cornelius was dead, Galelius started to realize that his way of doing things was actually somewhat reliable.

“I shall ask Her Majesty about this. Galelius, you must realize that this concerns the future soulmate of the Queen, which means that it concerns the continued existence of the Celestials. Moreover, Lady Minerva escaped from Cornelius’ clutches as well, so we have no time to lose!”

“I know that!”

Galelius couldn’t help but raise his voice. Lucius realized that he went too far, and thus gave a slight cough.

“Say, the priests of the Inner Palace probably saw this mark before, didn’t they? Did Hieronihica say anything about it?”

Lucius’ question made Galelius furrow his brows.

“……. Galelius?”

The reason for Galelius’ reaction was due to the responses of the priests of the Inner Palace when they saw the picture— pale, terrified.

Apart from that, the leader of the Inner Palace, Lady Hieronihica, moaned when she saw the picture—

“…… Beast……”

Galelius muttered. At his side, Lucius couldn’t help but frown as well, “The Brand of the Beast who devours all stars at the end of time, huh……”

Afterword

As this is my first job in MF Bunko, I'll have to say to the readers, hello, nice to meet you!

When I first received a request from MF Bunko for me to write a book, I already had two stories at hand. One of them I already had the story in mind, while I only had a few ideas and characters thought out for the other. I emailed both of my proposals to my editor. Basically, if the former went through, I could start writing any day, but if he liked the latter, I actually thought at the time that it would be rather troublesome. After all, that email contained only a document that contained ideas that just surfaced in my mind.

When I think about it, that idea was actually born from a desire to write a Western fantasy, and I wanted to see a girl dressed like a girl, running on the battlefield with a large sword. But the problem was, putting the girl on a battlefield wasn't really hard, but rather making her go on a battlefield without armor. That required a convincing reason. Regarding that part, I thought of many different possibilities, for instance she could predict her enemies' attacks. If so, not wearing armor would be to her advantage. Apart from that, most deaths on the battlefield in the olden days were due to arrow injuries, so she could just sweep the whole rain of arrows away with a swing of her large sword……

At this point, I believe that you already know which proposal the editorial team chose— the proposal with only ideas and characters.

Anyway, everything had to be written from scratch. Hence, I had to start discussing for ideas with my editor …… We started over after the end of the meeting about the first draft. After I started writing, we started over yet again. In the end, the direction of the story was completely different from the first draft. I apologize for the trouble that I gave to my editors in this aspect……

But speaking of which, during the process of continually starting over from scratch, there are two parts that did not change— the title of the story and the female lead's name.

Everyone knows that playing cards contain K, Q and J, and these cards have different suits. It is said that each card was actually modeled on a person in a real legend. The 'Sword Queen' of spades was modeled Pallas Athena from Greek mythology, and she was known as

Minerva in Roman mythology. If any of you have playing cards at hand, you can take a look at how the Queen of spades looks like. That would be Minerva.

Actually, when I wrote until here, I took out my playing cards to have a look as well, but since that set was a special gift from B'z's CD, the picture on Q was of course one of Matsumoto and Koushi, so it was really quite meaningless in various aspects……

Finally, when I received the illustrations of the book from the illustrator, Yuu Hitoshi-sensei, I could even an illusion of "Yuu Hitoshi-sensei drew the illustrations first , then I'm taking a look at it to get ideas from it"……. No, it wasn't an illusion, I did indeed receive the drafts of the characters when I was writing. So sorry for handing in my draft so late, and thank you for drawing such beautiful illustrations for this work. Please allow me to thank you here!

Sugii Hikaru